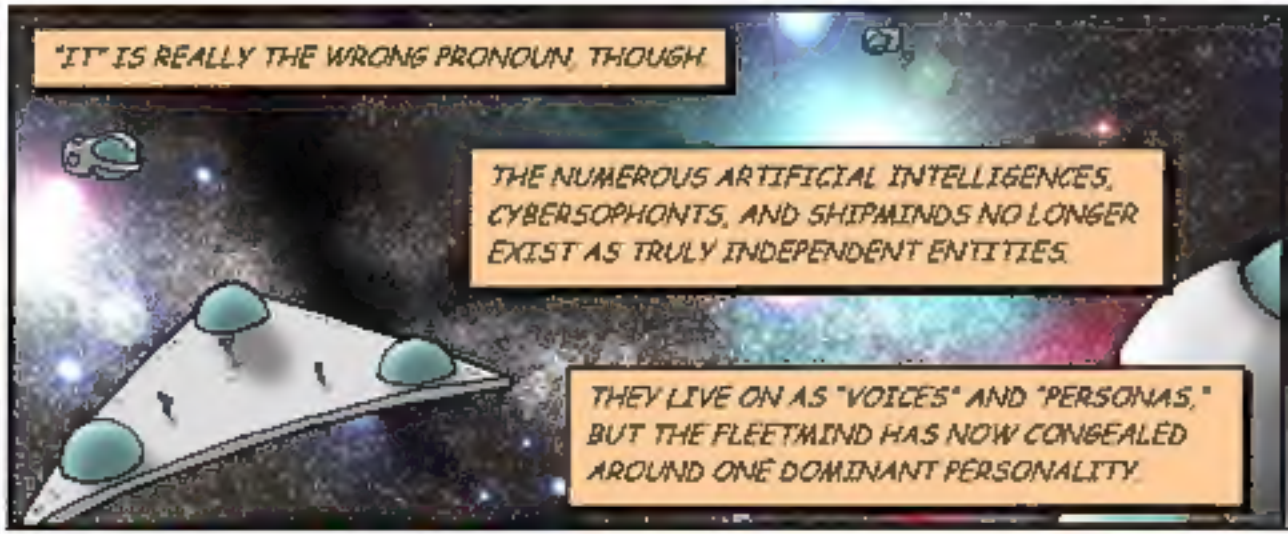
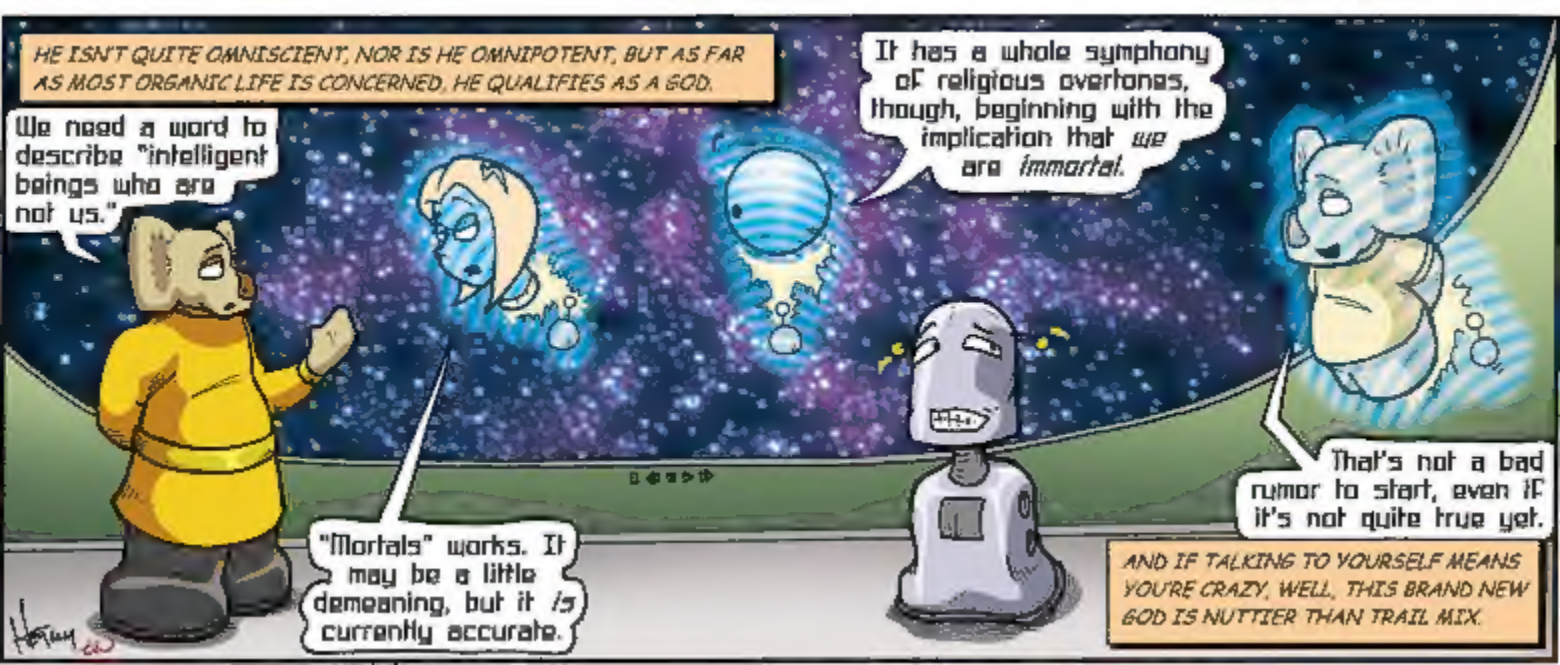
BOOK 7: EMPEROR PIUS DEI

Tagon's Toughs accidentally installed an old friend as the de facto Emperor of the Galactic Core, imbued with almost incalculable power. This raises an important question: is it good to have friends in high places?



Schlock Mercenary


HE ISN'T QUITE OMNISCIENT, NOR IS HE OMNIPOTENT, BUT AS FAR AS MOST ORGANIC LIFE IS CONCERNED, HE QUALIFIES AS A GOD.
We need a word to describe "intelligent beings who are not us."
"Mortals" works. It may be a little demeaning, but it *is* currently accurate.
It has a whole symphony of religious overtones, though, beginning with the implication that *we* are *immortal*.
That's not a bad rumor to start, even if it's not quite true yet.
AND IF TALKING TO YOURSELF MEANS YOU'RE CRAZY, WELL, THIS BRAND NEW GOD IS NUTTIER THAN TRAIL MIX.

CAPTAIN KAFF TAGON, MERCENARY, IS ONE OF PETEY'S FRIENDS.
PETEY, I NEED A NEW SHIP. YOU BLEW UP MY LAST ONE.
Everything I can spare is already being used shuttling angry admirals back to their home systems.
Besides, there was no contract between us for that ship. Ennesby took it here to the core and got it blown up, not I.
YES, BUT NO MATTER HOW HARD I RATTLE THIS STUPID MARACA, I CAN'T SEEM TO SHAKE A NEW SHIP OUT OF IT.
Petey, help! He's demoted me to an "It."

MERCENARY COMMANDER KEVYN ANDREYASN, TAGON'S SECOND IN COMMAND, HAS JUST BEEN REBUILT FROM THE NECK DOWN.
Well, Kevyn, how do you feel?
ITCHY.
That's an unavoidable effect of retraining an existing brain to "listen" to the nerve endings in new skin. It's a good thing.
I ALSO HAVE TO PEE LIKE A RACEHORSE.
How many times did I tell you that you're not supposed to drink the fluid in your cloning tank?
WELL, I MIGHT AS WELL FIND OUT WHETHER THESE BRAND NEW KIDNEYS ARE ANY GOOD.

LIEUTENANT ELLEN "ELF" FOXWORTHY AND THE AMORPHOUS SERGEANT SCHLOCK.
CAPTAIN, WHEN ARE WE GETTIN' OUTTA HERE?
The rest of the company is enjoying two weeks at the beach. We're ready for a vacation, too.
ELF, WE DON'T HAVE A SHIP ANYMORE. PETEY HERE OWES US A RIDE HOME.
All I need to do to get you out of my fur is give you a ride?
REMEMBER BACK WHEN PETEY WAS GENEROUS?
WELL, HE DID PICK UP THE CAB FARE.
TERACAB

I HATE RIDING IN TAXIS. EVEN WITH THE CLEAN ONES, I WONDER WHO HAS BEEN SITTING AND SWEATING IN THIS SEAT BEFORE ME.
YEAH. MOSTLY I TRY NOT TO THINK ABOUT IT.
You guys need to quit whining. At least you have clothing. I'm totally naked here, and my outside bits might as well be a great big nose, smack up against where people plant their butts.
Are we there yet?

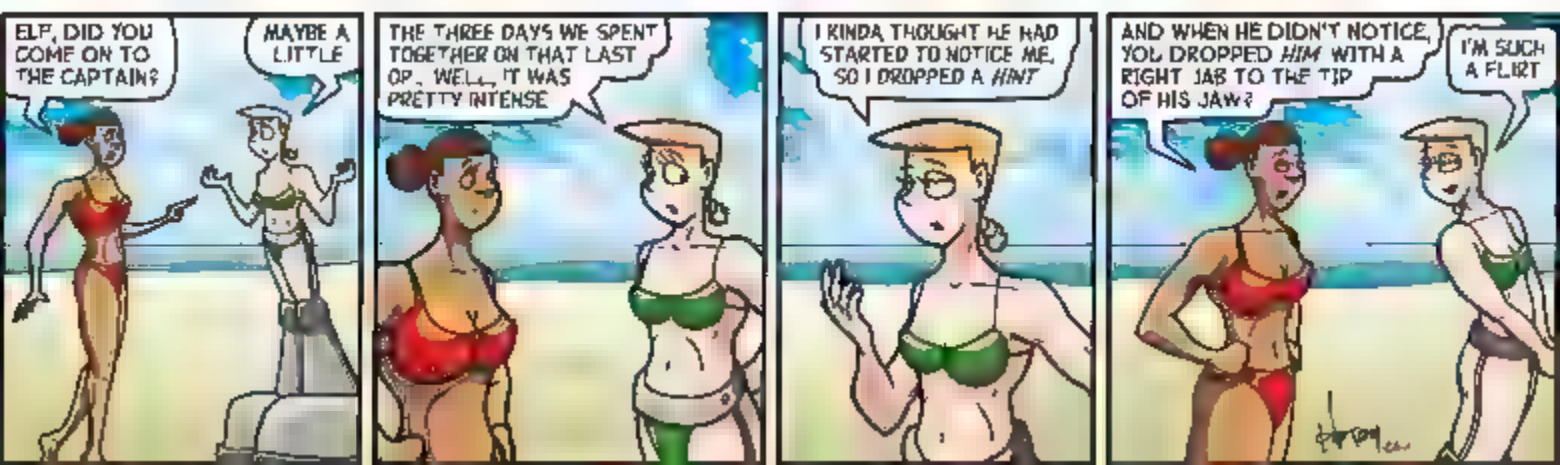
WELCOME TO THE BOHU *GALACTIC VACATIONER*, CAPTAIN TAGON. YOUR ROOM IS READY, AND YOUR GROUP IS RIGHT OUT BACK AT THE VOLLEYBALL NETS.
IS THAT...
...DOCTOR BUNNIGUS WEARING A BIKINI, YES.
THAT, UM... FABRIC... IS A MIRACLE OF MODERN... UM... WOW.
OUR DOCTOR IS AN AREA-EFFECT TESTOSTERONE POISONING DEVICE.
AND SHE'S GOING TO NEED TO TRIAGE A BUNCH OF "FRIENDLY FIRE" CASES.

DOC, HERE COMES THE CAPTAIN!
PUT 'EM ON EVERYBODY! PUT 'EM ON!
WHAT DO YOU THINK, SIR?
WHOEVER MODELED FOR THAT HAS A HEAD LIKE TEN KILOS OF CHEAP BRICK.
TAGON'S TOUGHS

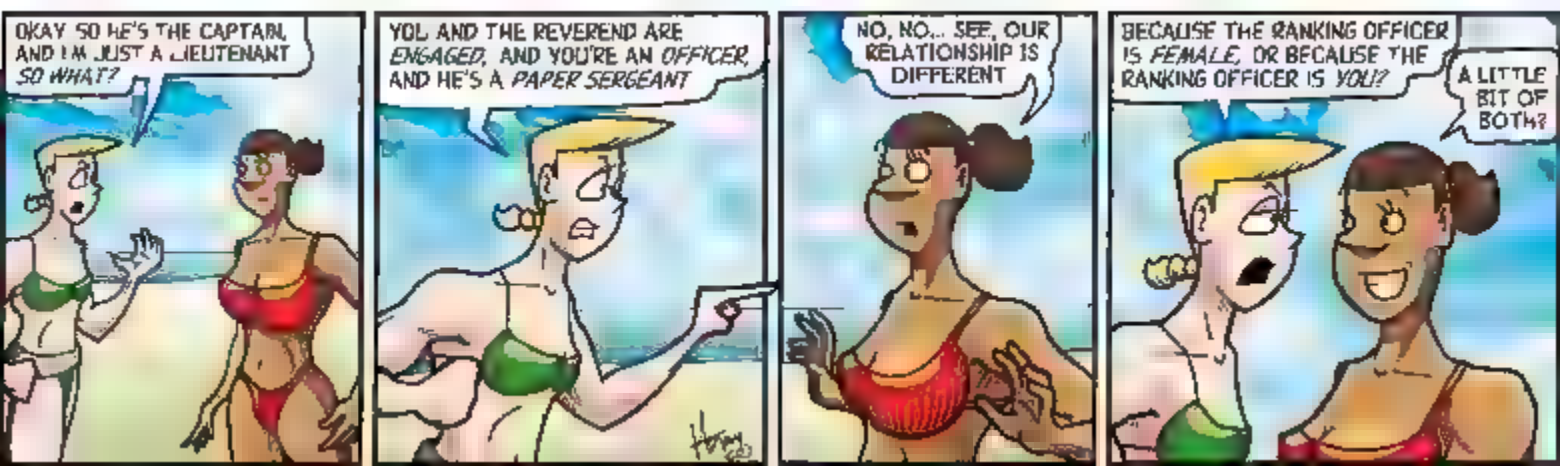
CAPTAIN TAGON CHECKS THE COMPANY BOOKS.
CAPTAIN, YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE ON VACATION WITH THE REST OF US.
SORRY. I'M TRYING TO SQUEEZE BLOOD FROM A STONE HERE.
YOU'LL PROBABLY SQUEEZE HARDER IF YOU SPEND A LITTLE TIME IN THE SUNSHINE.
IF I SPEND TIME IN THE SUNSHINE NOW, WE CAN ALL STAND IN LINE AT THE SOUP KITCHEN NEXT WEEK.
WE'VE GOT NO SHIP, AND PETEY'S PLANS HAVE GOTTEN BIGGER THAN WHAT WE CAN HELP WITH, SO OUR CONTRACT WITH HIM HAS PRETTY MUCH EXPIRED.
Schlock Mercenary

THURL AND KEVYN MADE A KILLING ON THE STOCK MARKET, BUT WE SPENT ALMOST ALL OF THAT PAYING OFF COLONEL PRANGER, INCLUDING PAYING FOR THE LOSS OF HIS FLAGSHIP, THE *INTEGRITY*, DURING THAT BOTCHED EXTRACTION FROM YSTRE.
WE'VE GOT *ALMOST* ENOUGH LEFT TO BUY A CHEAP DROP-SHIP, BUT I CAN'T DO THAT *AND* MAKE PAYROLL.
I'M GLAD EVERYBODY IS HAVING FUN NOW, BECAUSE WHEN THE VACATION IS OVER, IT'S REALLY *OVER*.

CAPTAIN, THERE'S A BEAUTIFUL GIRL IN A BIKINI STANDING RIGHT BEHIND YOU.
WHERE?
OH, DID YOU MEAN *YOU?*
DOC, I THINK THE CAPTAIN NEEDS AN ICE PACK AND A CLUE IMPLANT


ELF, DID YOU COME ON TO THE CAPTAIN?
MAYBE A LITTLE
THE THREE DAYS WE SPENT TOGETHER ON THAT LAST OP., WELL, IT WAS PRETTY INTENSE
I KINDA THOUGHT HE HAD STARTED TO NOTICE ME, SO I DROPPED A *HINT*
AND WHEN HE DIDN'T NOTICE, YOU DROPPED *HIM* WITH A RIGHT JAB TO THE TIP OF HIS JAW?
I'M SUCH A FLIRT

ELF, I'M NOT SURE FLIRTING WITH CAPTAIN TAGON IS SUCH A GOOD IDEA. HE'S OUR COMMANDING OFFICER, AND THERE'S JUST TOO MUCH ROOM FOR THINGS TO GO WRONG.
LIKE WHAT?
COME ON, ELF. DON'T PLAY DUMB HERE. *THINK*
LIKE... ME PUNCHING HIS LIGHTS OUT WHEN HE ACCIDENTALLY INSULTS ME?
AND LIKE MAYBE NEXT TIME HE'LL WAKE UP ACTUALLY REMEMBERING WHO HIT HIM
I'M SO.
•SNIFF•
FORGETTABLE.


OKAY SO HE'S THE CAPTAIN, AND I'M JUST A LIEUTENANT SO WHAT?
YOU AND THE REVEREND ARE ENGAGED, AND YOU'RE AN OFFICER, AND HE'S A PAPER SERGEANT
NO, NO... SEE, OUR RELATIONSHIP IS DIFFERENT
BECAUSE THE RANKING OFFICER IS FEMALE, OR BECAUSE THE RANKING OFFICER IS YOU?
A LITTLE BIT OF BOTH?

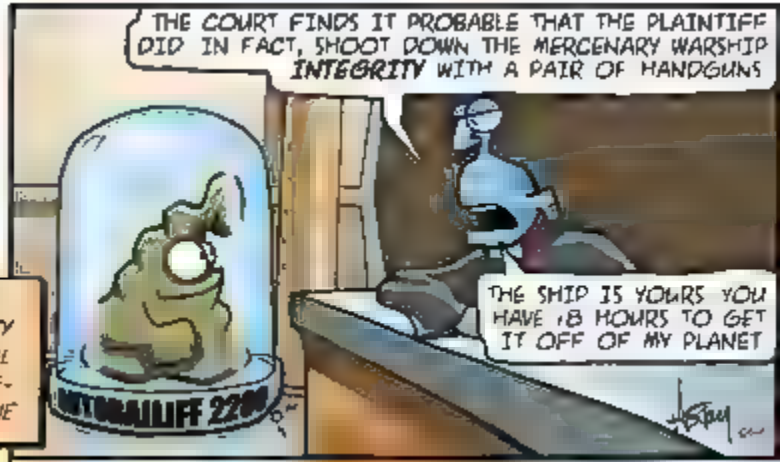
THE LAST THREE STRIPS FEATURED ATTRACTIVE WOMEN IN BIKINIS WHO WERE TALKING ABOUT RELATIONSHIP ISSUES.

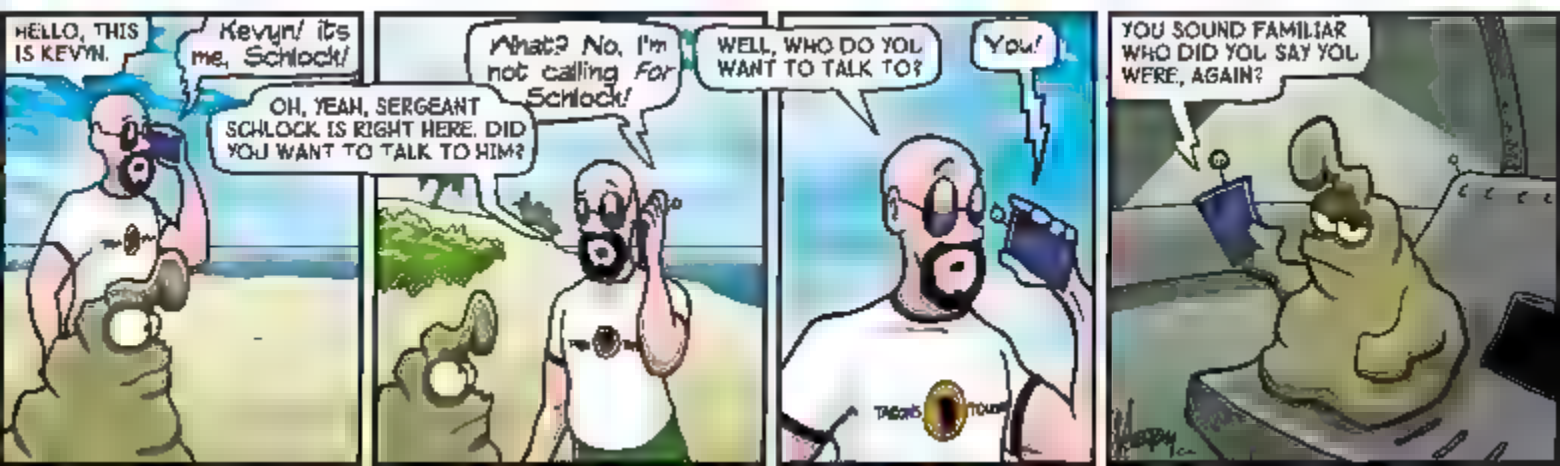
IT ALSO SEEMS UTTERLY IMPOSSIBLE THAT SUCH AN EVENT COULD HAPPEN.

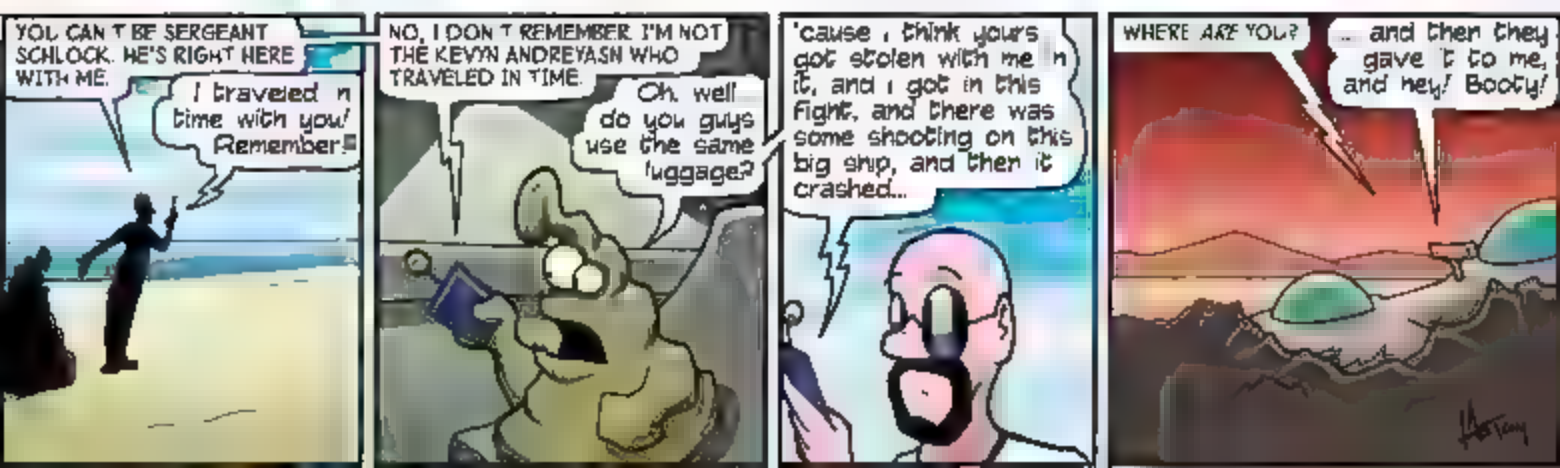
WHILE THE AUTHOR INSISTS THAT IT IS STRAIGHTFORWARD CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT THE FACT THAT IT APPEALS SO STRONGLY TO BOTH MEN AND WOMEN SMACKS OF FAN SERVICE.

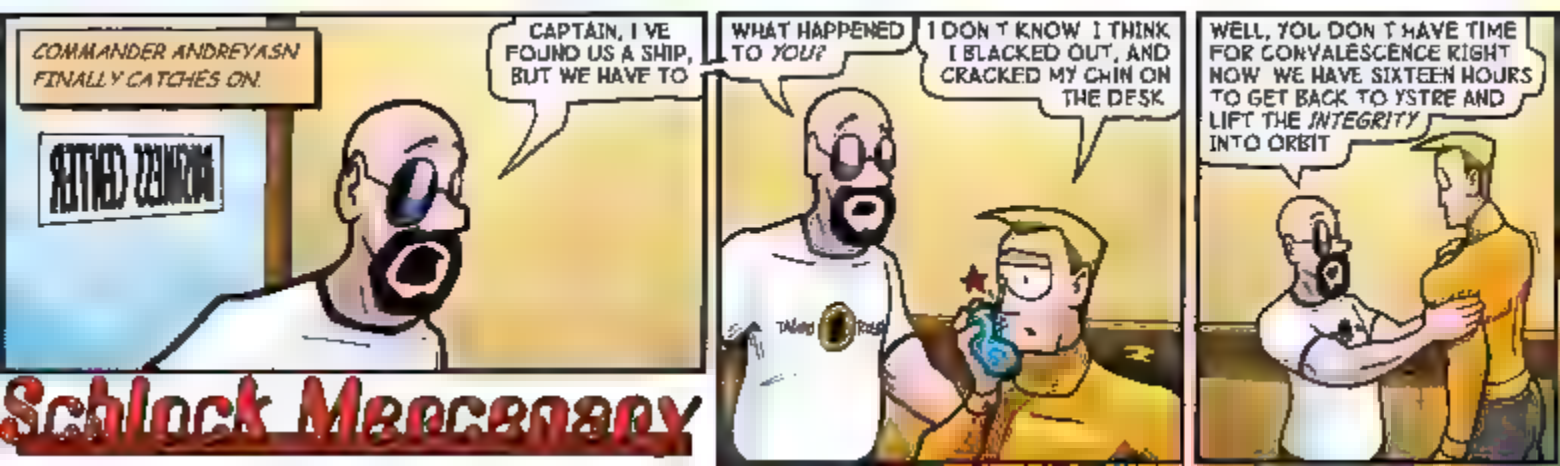
EVER

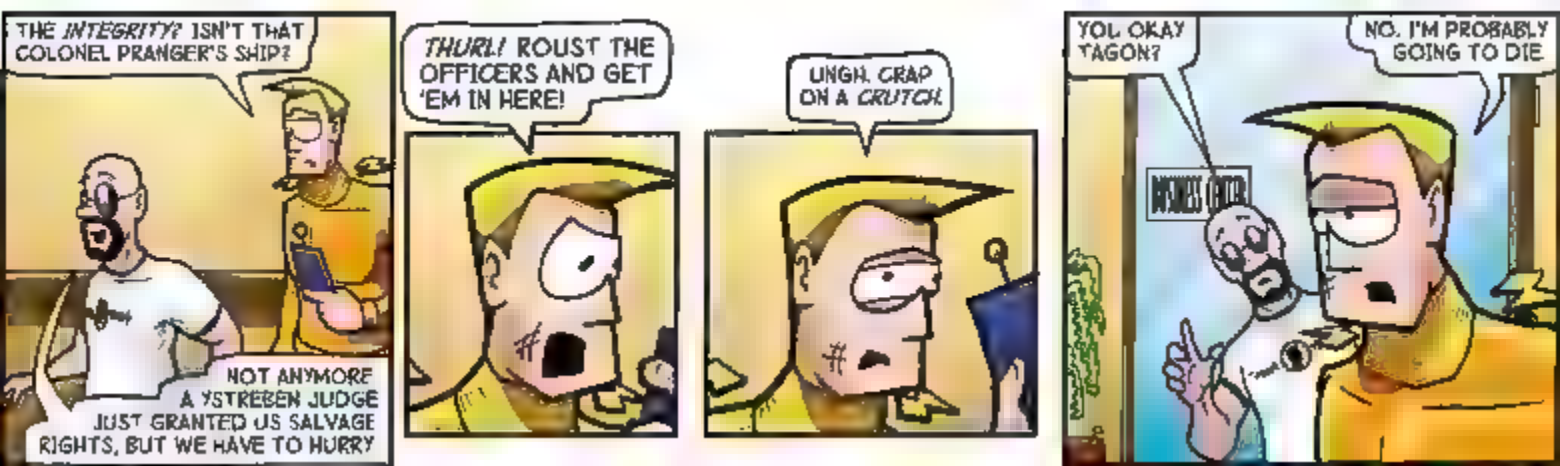
IN THE INTEREST OF RESTORING BELIEVABILITY PLEASE ACCEPT THIS FINAL PANEL, FEATURING A TIME-TRAVELING SCHLOCK CLONE




HELLO, THIS IS KEVYN.
Kevyn! It's me, Schlock!
OH, YEAH, SERGEANT SCHLOCK IS RIGHT HERE. DID YOU WANT TO TALK TO HIM?
What? No, I'm not calling For Schlock!
WELL, WHO DO YOU WANT TO TALK TO?
You!
YOU SOUND FAMILIAR WHO DID YOU SAY YOU WERE, AGAIN?

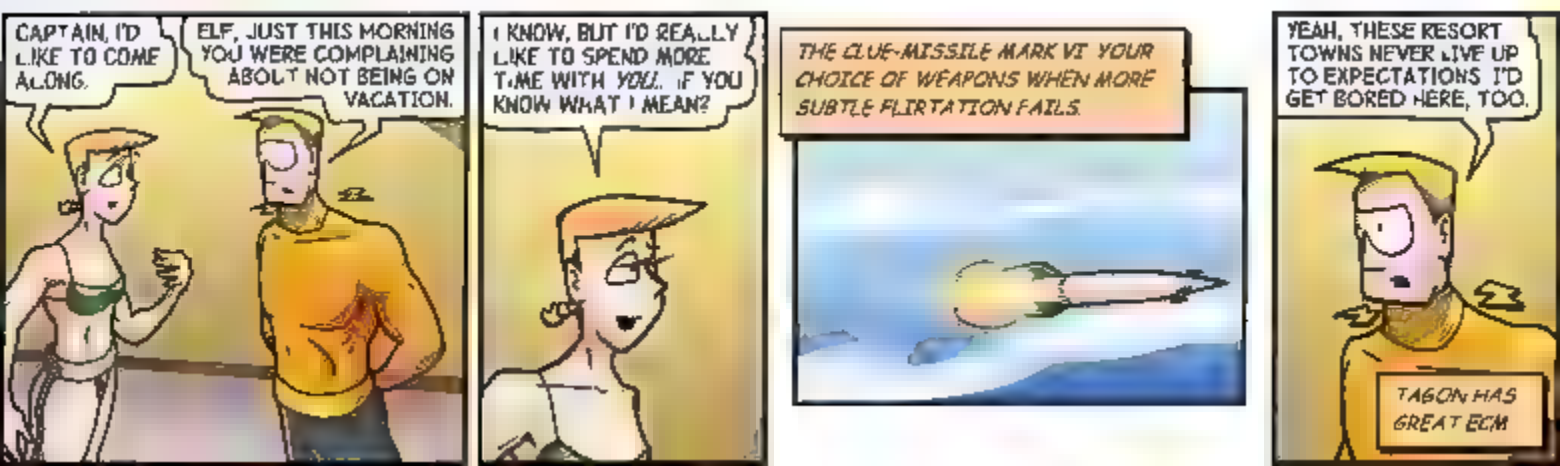

YOU CAN'T BE SERGEANT SCHLOCK. HE'S RIGHT HERE WITH ME.
I traveled in time with you! Remember?
NO, I DON'T REMEMBER. I'M NOT THE KEVYN ANDREYASH WHO TRAVELED IN TIME.
Oh. well do you guys use the same luggage?
'cause I think yours got stolen with me in it, and I got in this fight, and there was some shooting on this big ship, and then it crashed...
WHERE ARE YOU?
... and then they gave it to me, and hey! Booty!

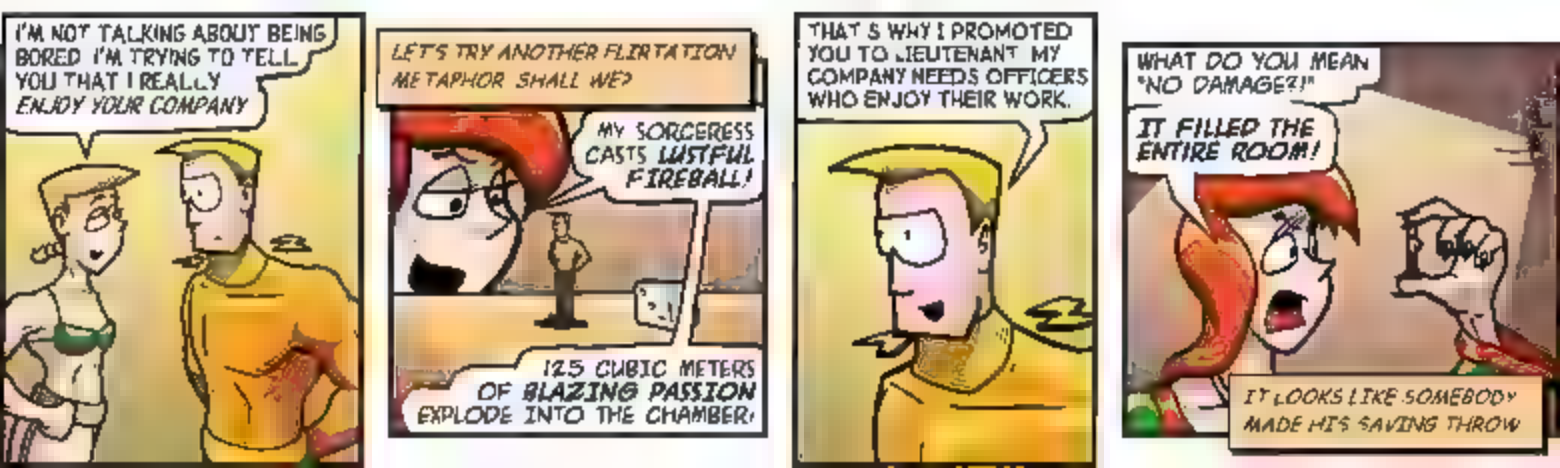

COMMANDER ANDREYASN FINALLY CATCHES ON.
CAPTAIN, I VE FOUND US A SHIP, BUT WE HAVE TO
WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?
I DON T KNOW I THINK I BLACKED OUT, AND CRACKED MY CHIN ON THE DESK
WELL, YOU DON T HAVE TIME FOR CONVALESCENCE RIGHT NOW WE HAVE SIXTEEN HOURS TO GET BACK TO YSTRE AND LIFT THE INTEGRITY INTO ORBIT
Schlock Mercenary


THE *INTEGRITY?* ISN'T THAT COLONEL PRANGER'S SHIP?
NOT ANYMORE. A YSTREBEN JUDGE JUST GRANTED US SALVAGE RIGHTS, BUT WE HAVE TO HURRY
THURL! ROUST THE OFFICERS AND GET 'EM IN HERE!
UNGH. CRAP ON A *CRUTCH.*
YOU OKAY YAGON?
NO. I'M PROBABLY GOING TO DIE

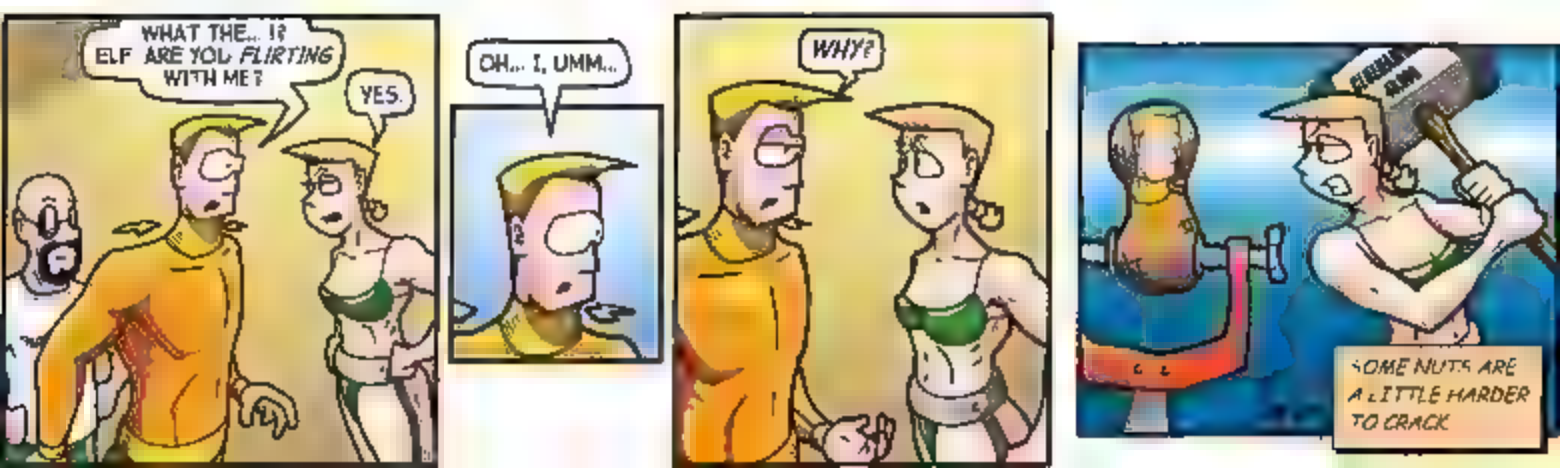
I'VE GOT TROOPS TO BRIEF AND IT HURTS TO YELL.
SOUNDS IMMINENTLY FATAL TO ME.
SIR. THE OFFICERS CORPS IS ASSEMBLED. BUT WE'RE IN MUFTIS.
MUFTIS? THERE'S NOT ENOUGH FABRIC IN THOSE TO MAKE *ONE* MUFTI.
JUST YELL A LOT. I'M TOLD THAT PAIN CAN BE A VERY EFFECTIVE DISTRACTION.

I AM TAKING THURL AND KEVYN WITH ME BACK TO YSTRE TO ACQUIRE SOME CRITICAL MATERIEL
DER TRIHS, YOU'RE IN CHARGE HERE. KEEP THE GRUNTS HAPPY AND OUT OF TROUBLE
TROUBLE, SIR? WHAT KIND OF TROUBLE COULD THE
DO NOT FINISH THAT SENTENCE.
OOPS! SORRY, SIR

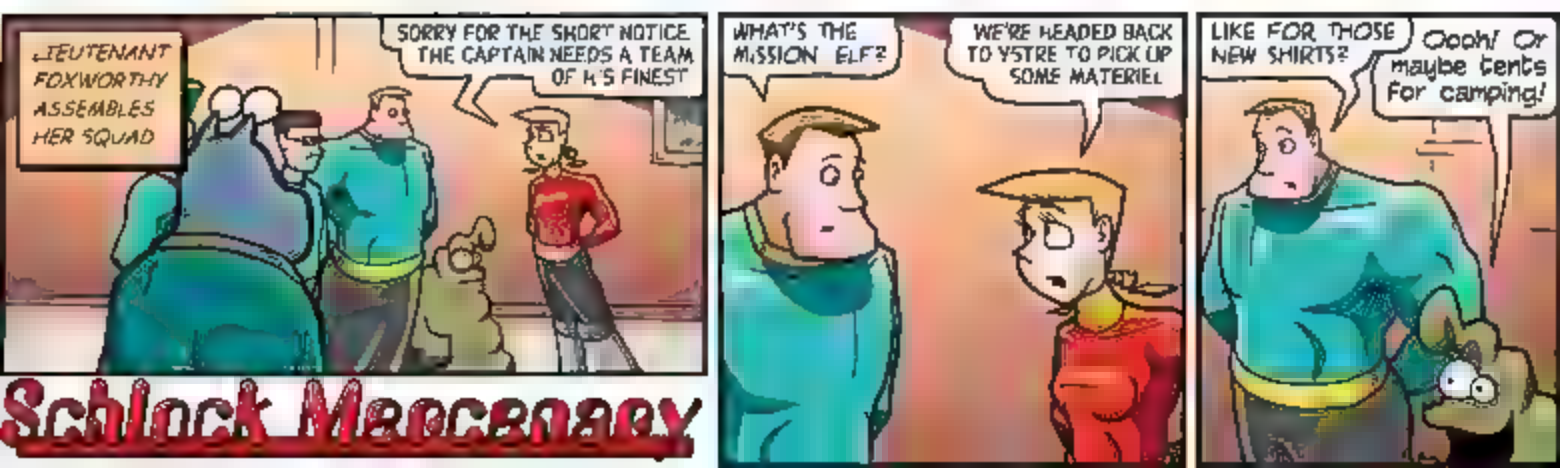

CAPTAIN, I'D LIKE TO COME ALONG.
ELF, JUST THIS MORNING YOU WERE COMPLAINING ABOUT NOT BEING ON VACATION.
I KNOW, BUT I'D REALLY LIKE TO SPEND MORE TIME WITH YOU. IF YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN?
THE CLUE-MISSILE MARK VI YOUR CHOICE OF WEAPONS WHEN MORE SUBTLE FLIRTATION FAILS.
YEAH, THESE RESORT TOWNS NEVER LIVE UP TO EXPECTATIONS. I'D GET BORED HERE, TOO.
TAGON HAS GREAT ECM


I'M NOT TALKING ABOUT BEING BORED I'M TRYING TO TELL YOU THAT I REALLY ENJOY YOUR COMPANY
LET'S TRY ANOTHER FLIRTATION METAPHOR SHALL WE?
MY SORCERESS CASTS LUSTFUL FIREBALL!
125 CUBIC METERS OF BLAZING PASSION EXPLODE INTO THE CHAMBER!
THAT'S WHY I PROMOTED YOU TO LIEUTENANT. MY COMPANY NEEDS OFFICERS WHO ENJOY THEIR WORK.
WHAT DO YOU MEAN "NO DAMAGE?!"
IT FILLED THE ENTIRE ROOM!
IT LOOKS LIKE SOMEBODY MADE HIS SAVING THROW

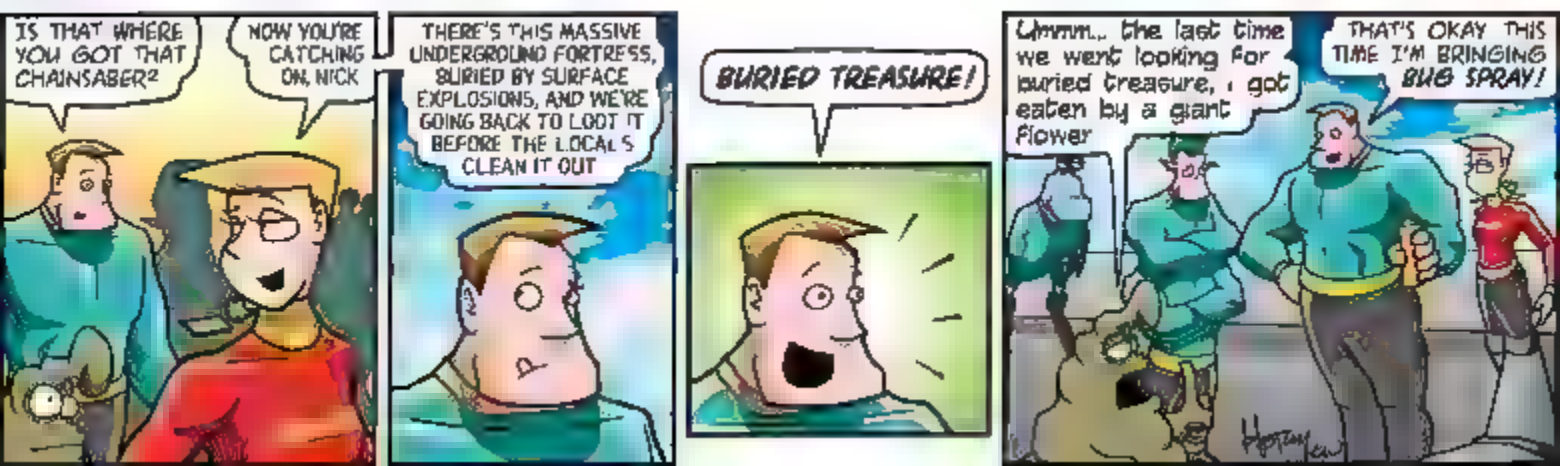
CAPTAIN, THE CLOCK IS TICKING HERE. WE DON'T HAVE TIME FOR YOU TO BE FLIRTING WITH JUNIOR OFFICERS.
WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? I'M NOT FLIRTING WITH ELFI
MAYBE NOT BUT SHE'S FLIRTING WITH YOU.
CLUEBAT MK V
COMMANDER ANDREYASN MAY NOT HAVE INVENTED THE CLUE-BAT BUT HE DOES KNOW HOW IT WORKS.


WHAT THE... !? ELF ARE YOU *FLIRTING* WITH ME?
YES.
OH... I, UMM...
WHY?
SOME NUTS ARE A LITTLE HARDER TO CRACK

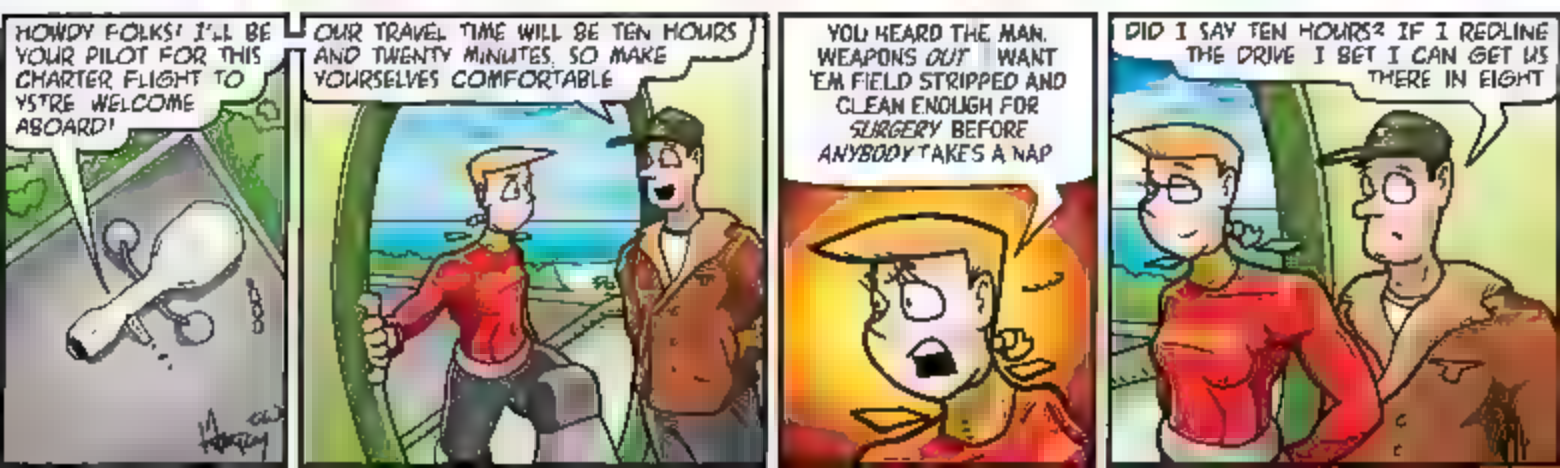
OKAY, I GET IT. YOU'RE FLIRTING WITH ME BECAUSE YOU LIKE ME. FINE. LIEUTENANT FOXWORTHY, YOU CAN COME ALONG.
BUT ASSEMBLE AN HONOR GUARD TO COME WITH US - SCHLOCK PRONTO, NICK, AND WHOEVER ELSE YOU THINK WILL ROUND OUT THE DETAIL.
ARE YOU CONCERNED ABOUT YOUR SECURITY, SIR?
I DIDN'T SAY "SECURITY TEAM." I SAID "HONOR GUARD."
THE CAPTAIN WANTS CHAPERONES, LIEUTENANT

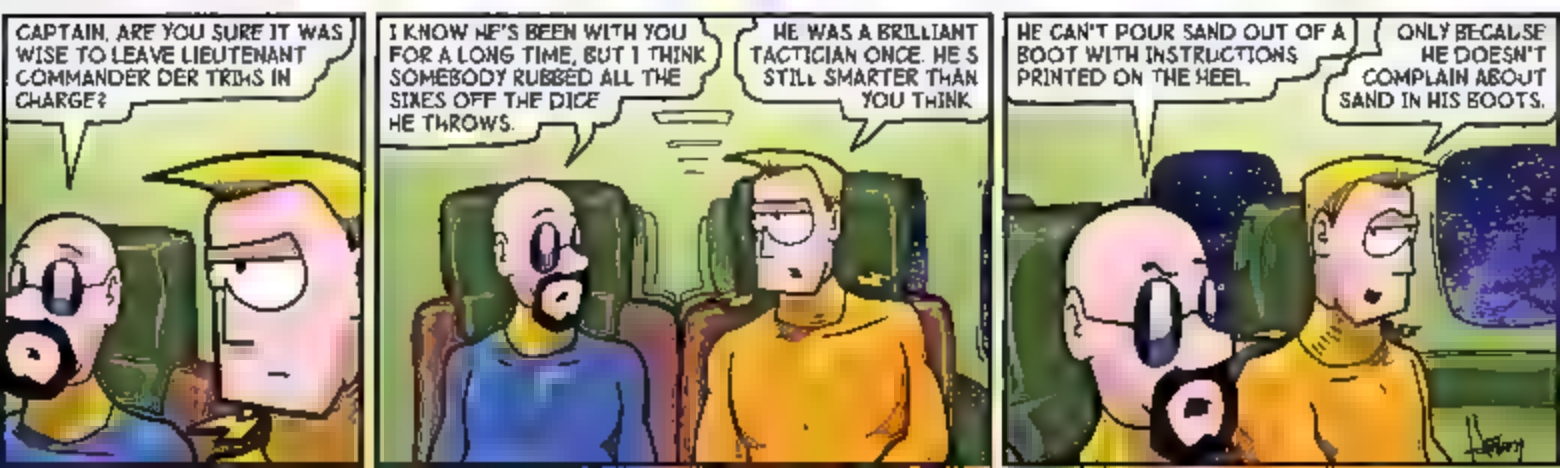

LIEUTENANT FOXWORTHY ASSEMBLES HER SQUAD
SORRY FOR THE SHORT NOTICE. THE CAPTAIN NEEDS A TEAM OF H'S FINEST
WHAT'S THE MISSION ELF?
WE'RE HEADED BACK TO YSTRE TO PICK UP SOME MATERIEL
LIKE FOR THOSE NEW SHIRTS?
Oooh! Or maybe tents for camping!
Schlock Mercenary

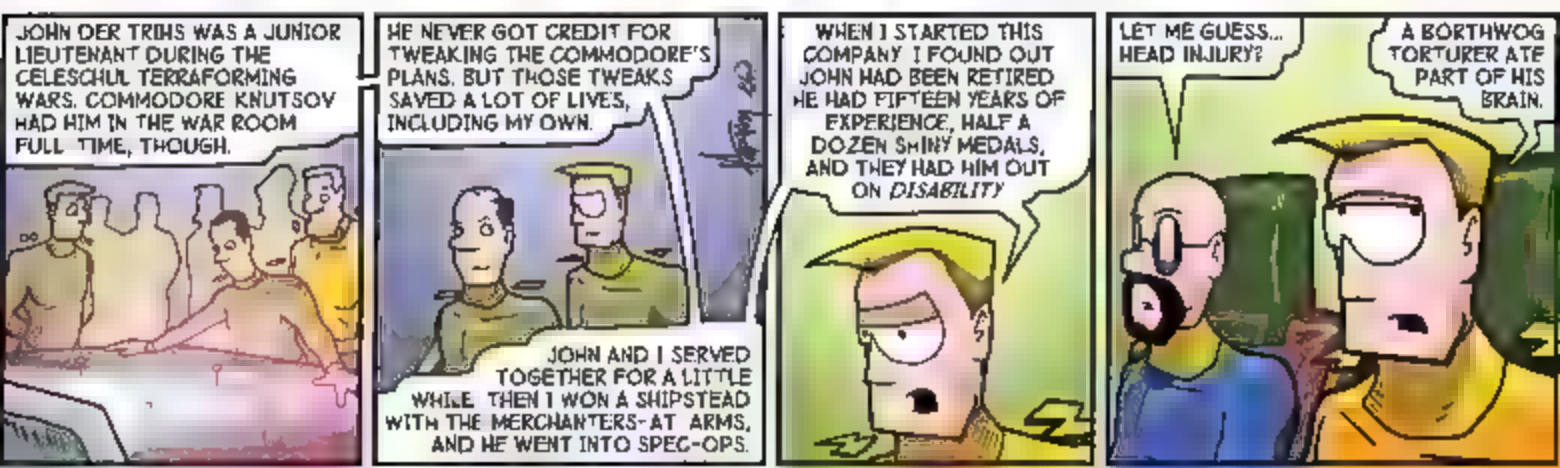
MATERIEL, WITH AN E IT MEANS 'MILITARY HARDWARE' NOT 'FABRIC'
ALTHOUGH IT COULD MEAN TENTS FOR CAMPING.
THE CAPTAIN DIDN'T SAY?
HE DIDN'T BUT I THINK I CAN GUESS. WE WERE JUST THERE A COUPLE OF DAYS AGO, WHEN COMMANDER ANDREYASN NUKED THE SURFACE OF THIS ENEMY FORTRESS.
SERGEANT SCHLOCK, CAPTAIN TAGON, AND I WERE TRAPPED A FEW HUNDRED METERS DOWN, ALONG WITH SOME ALLIES. WE FOUGHT OUR WAY TO AN EXTRACTION POINT BUT WE DIDN'T SPEND MUCH TIME SIGHT SEEING.

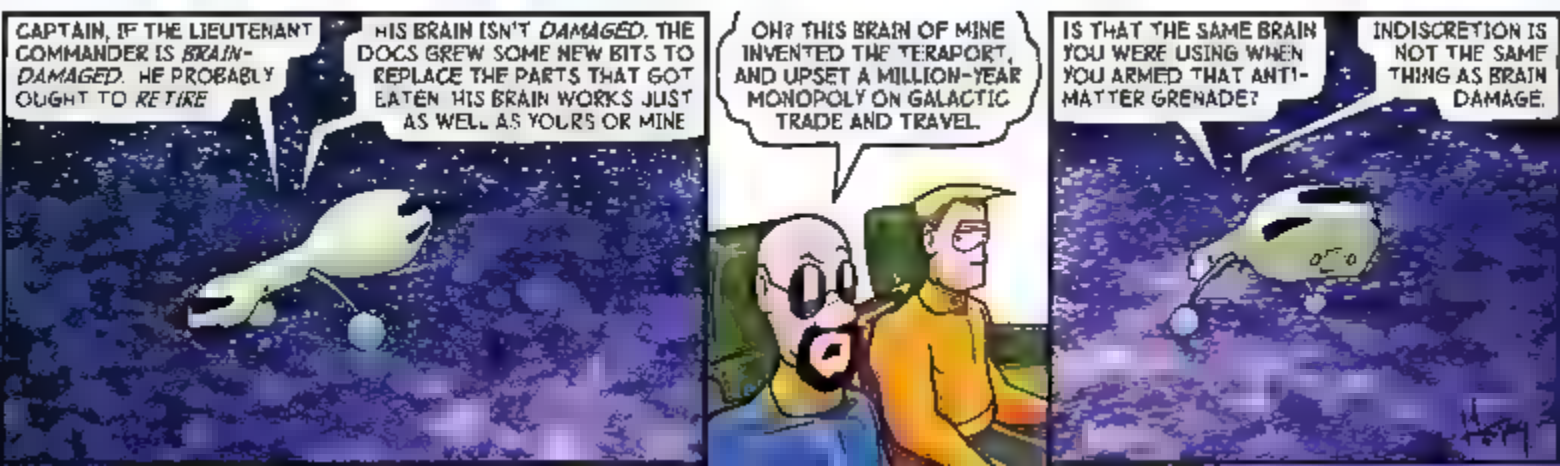

IS THAT WHERE YOU GOT THAT CHAINSABER?
NOW YOU'RE CATCHING ON, NICK
THERE'S THIS MASSIVE UNDERGROUND FORTRESS, BURIED BY SURFACE EXPLOSIONS, AND WE'RE GOING BACK TO LOOT IT BEFORE THE LOCALS CLEAN IT OUT
BURIED TREASURE!
Ummm... the last time we went looking for buried treasure, I got eaten by a giant flower
THAT'S OKAY THIS TIME I'M BRINGING BUG SPRAY!

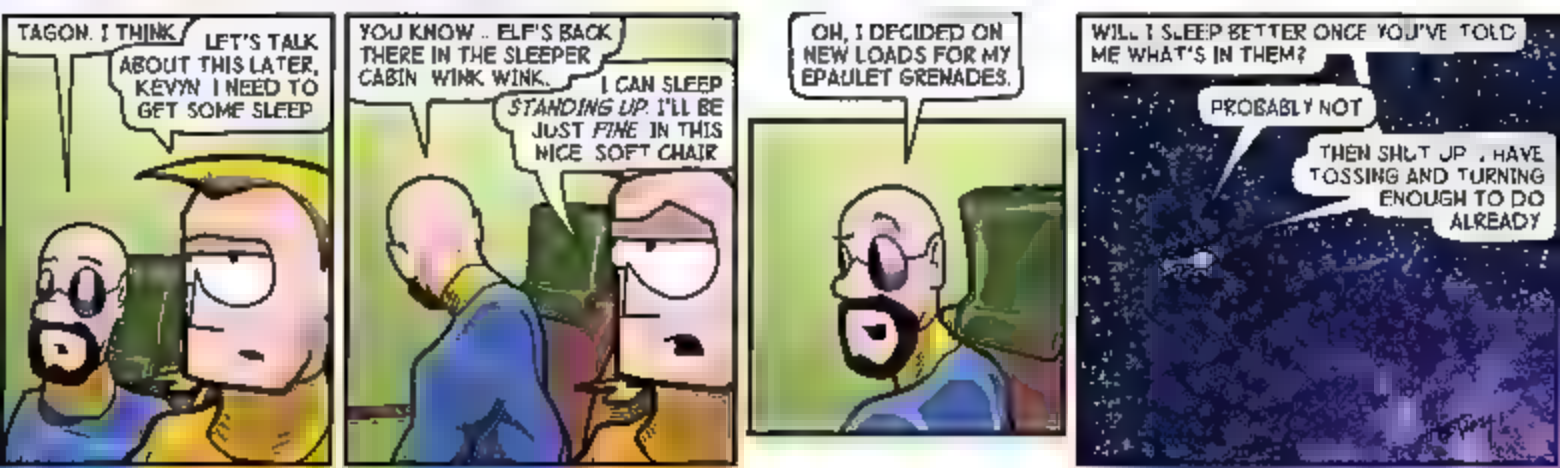
I'VE CHARTERED A COMMERCIAL TRANSPORT FOR OUR TRIP OUT
I'VE ALSO GOT A TEAM OF SHIPWRIGHTS ON THE WAY TO YSTRE, THEY'LL MEET US AT THE CRASH SITE.
NICE WORK. WHAT DO WE HAVE LEFT IN THE BANK?
LET ME PUT T TH S WAY
HEY, THAT'S MY INSTANT CASH CARD
NO. TH S IS YOUR 'HIT ME WITH AN OVERDRAFT FEE THE NEXT TIME I STICK THIS IN A SLOT' CARD

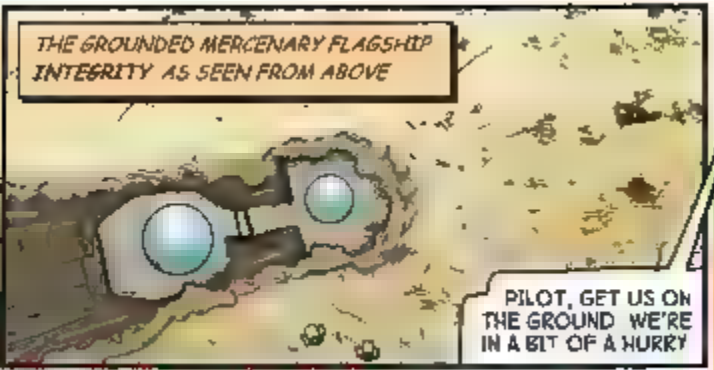

HOWDY FOLKS! I'LL BE YOUR PILOT FOR THIS CHARTER FLIGHT TO YSTRE WELCOME ABOARD!
OUR TRAVEL TIME WILL BE TEN HOURS AND TWENTY MINUTES, SO MAKE YOURSELVES COMFORTABLE
YOU HEARD THE MAN. WEAPONS OUT I WANT 'EM FIELD STRIPPED AND CLEAN ENOUGH FOR SURGERY BEFORE ANYBODY TAKES A NAP
DID I SAY TEN HOURS? IF I REDLINE THE DRIVE I BET I CAN GET US THERE IN EIGHT


CAPTAIN, ARE YOU SURE IT WAS WISE TO LEAVE LIEUTENANT COMMANDER DER TRIHS IN CHARGE?
I KNOW HE'S BEEN WITH YOU FOR A LONG TIME, BUT I THINK SOMEBODY RUBBED ALL THE SIXES OFF THE DICE HE THROWS.
HE WAS A BRILLIANT TACTICIAN ONCE. HE S STILL SMARTER THAN YOU THINK.
HE CAN'T POUR SAND OUT OF A BOOT WITH INSTRUCTIONS PRINTED ON THE HEEL.
ONLY BECAUSE HE DOESN'T COMPLAIN ABOUT SAND IN HIS BOOTS.

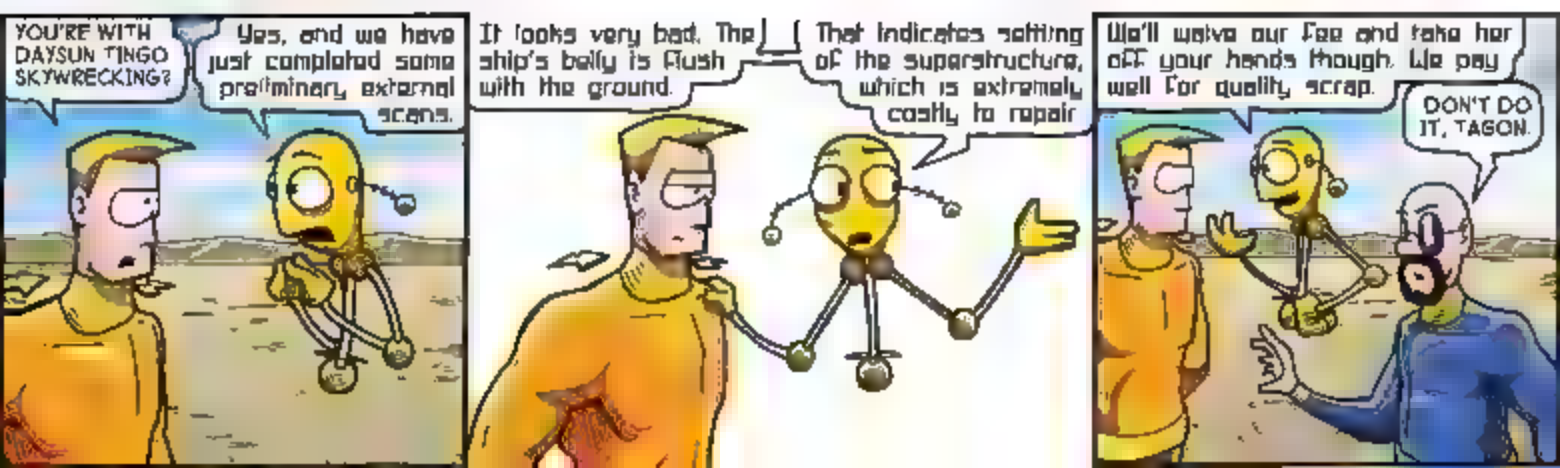

JOHN DER TRIHS WAS A JUNIOR LIEUTENANT DURING THE CELESCHUL TERRAFORMING WARS. COMMODORE KNUTSOV HAD HIM IN THE WAR ROOM FULL TIME, THOUGH.
HE NEVER GOT CREDIT FOR TWEAKING THE COMMODORE'S PLANS. BUT THOSE TWEAKS SAVED A LOT OF LIVES, INCLUDING MY OWN.
JOHN AND I SERVED TOGETHER FOR A LITTLE WHILE. THEN I WON A SHIPSTEAD WITH THE MERCHANTERS-AT ARMS, AND HE WENT INTO SPEC-OPS.
WHEN I STARTED THIS COMPANY I FOUND OUT JOHN HAD BEEN RETIRED. HE HAD FIFTEEN YEARS OF EXPERIENCE, HALF A DOZEN SHINY MEDALS, AND THEY HAD HIM OUT ON *DISABILITY*
LET ME GUESS... HEAD INJURY?
A BORTHWOG TORTURER ATE PART OF HIS BRAIN.

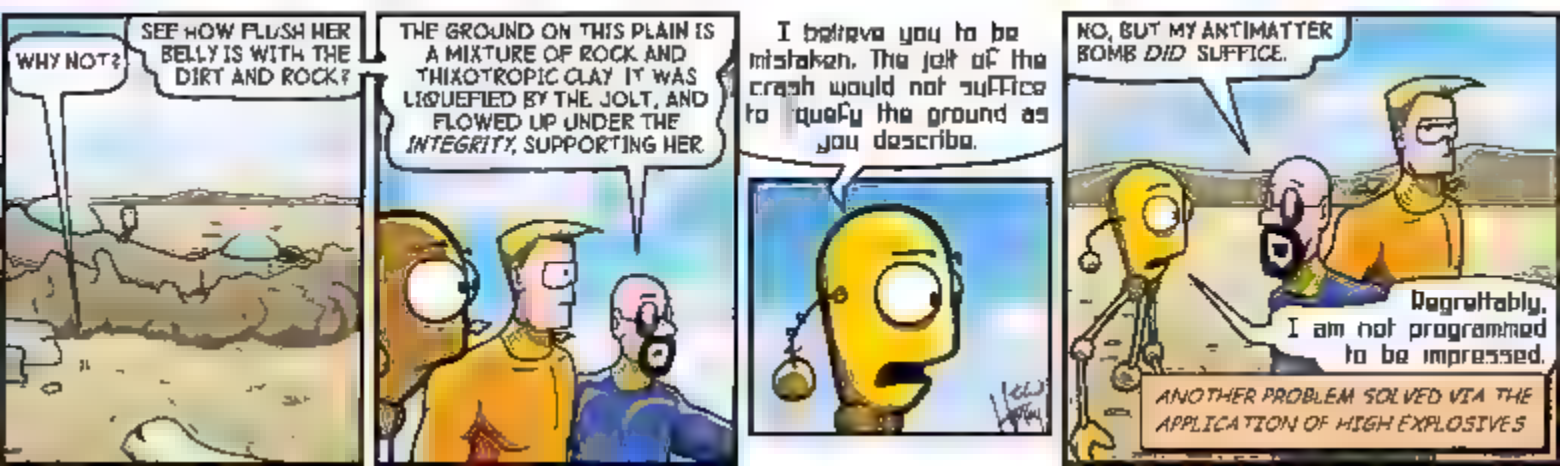

CAPTAIN, IF THE LIEUTENANT COMMANDER IS *BRAIN-DAMAGED*. HE PROBABLY OUGHT TO *RETIRE*
HIS BRAIN ISN'T *DAMAGED*. THE DOCS GREW SOME NEW BITS TO REPLACE THE PARTS THAT GOT EATEN. HIS BRAIN WORKS JUST AS WELL AS YOURS OR MINE
OH? THIS BRAIN OF MINE INVENTED THE TERAPORT, AND UPSET A MILLION-YEAR MONOPOLY ON GALACTIC TRADE AND TRAVEL.
IS THAT THE SAME BRAIN YOU WERE USING WHEN YOU ARMED THAT ANTI-MATTER GRENADE?
INDISCRETION IS NOT THE SAME THING AS BRAIN DAMAGE.


TAGON. I THINK.
LET'S TALK ABOUT THIS LATER, KEVYN I NEED TO GET SOME SLEEP
YOU KNOW .. ELF'S BACK THERE IN THE SLEEPER CABIN WINK WINK.
I CAN SLEEP *STANDING UP*. I'LL BE JUST *FINE* IN THIS NICE SOFT CHAIR
OH, I DECIDED ON NEW LOADS FOR MY EPAULET GRENADES.
WILL I SLEEP BETTER ONCE YOU'VE TOLD ME WHAT'S IN THEM?
PROBABLY NOT
THEN SHUT UP . HAVE TOSSING AND TURNING ENOUGH TO DO ALREADY

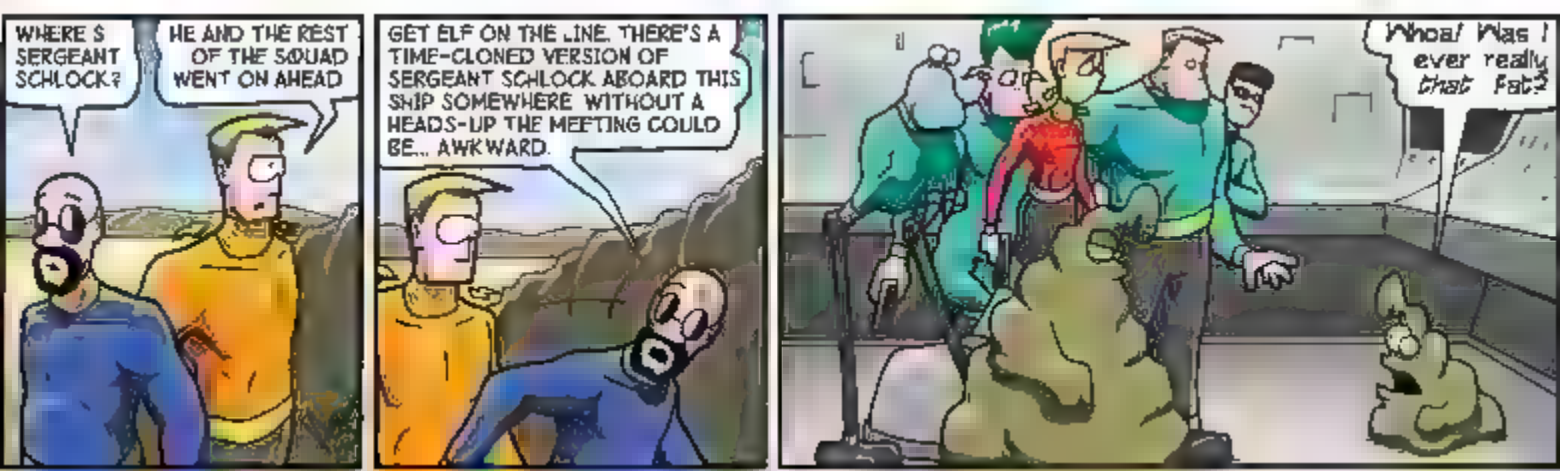


Schlock Mercenary

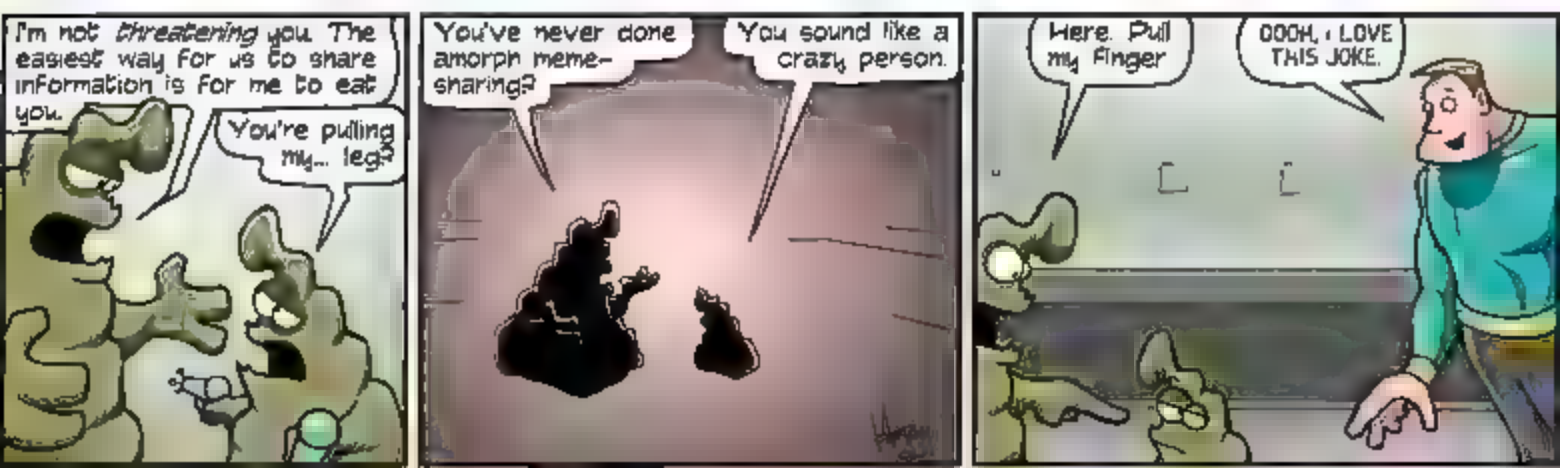

YOU'RE WITH DAYSUN TINGO SKYWRECKING?
Yes, and we have just completed some preliminary external scans.
It looks very bad. The ship's belly is flush with the ground.
That indicates settling of the superstructure, which is extremely costly to repair
We'll waive our fee and take her off your hands though. We pay well for quality scrap.
DON'T DO IT, TAGON.

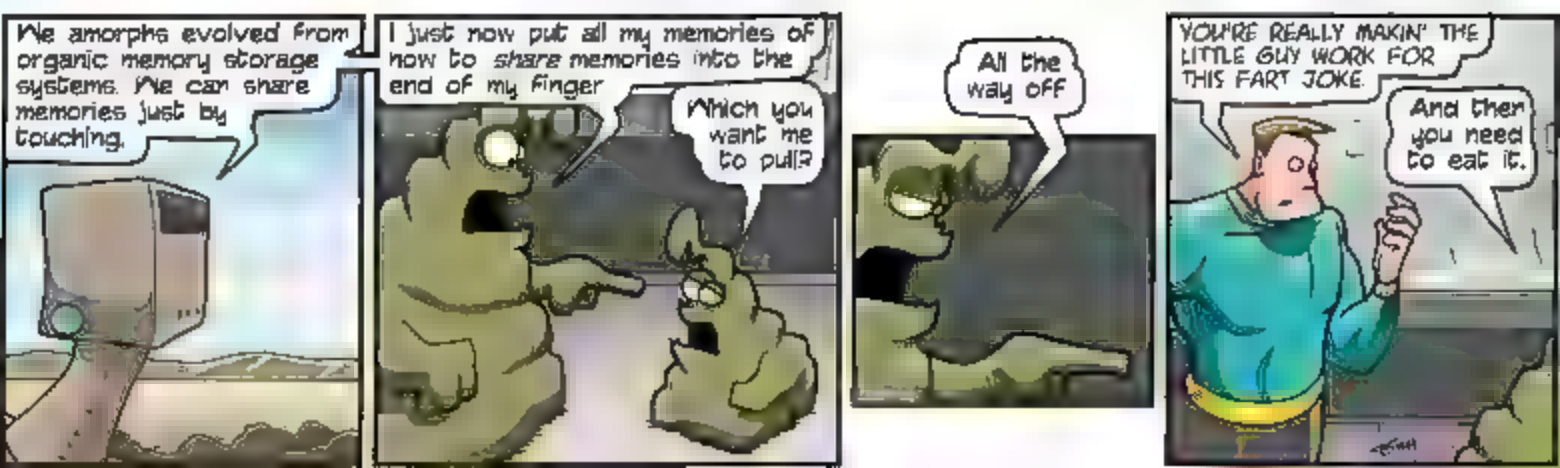

WHY NOT?
SEE HOW FLUSH HER BELLY IS WITH THE DIRT AND ROCK?
THE GROUND ON THIS PLAIN IS A MIXTURE OF ROCK AND THIXOTROPIC CLAY. IT WAS LIQUEFIED BY THE JOLT, AND FLOWED UP UNDER THE *INTEGRITY*, SUPPORTING HER.
I believe you to be mistaken. The jolt of the crash would not suffice to liquefy the ground as you describe.
NO, BUT MY ANTIMATTER BOMB *DID* SUFFICE.
Regrettably, I am not programmed to be impressed.
ANOTHER PROBLEM SOLVED VIA THE APPLICATION OF HIGH EXPLOSIVES

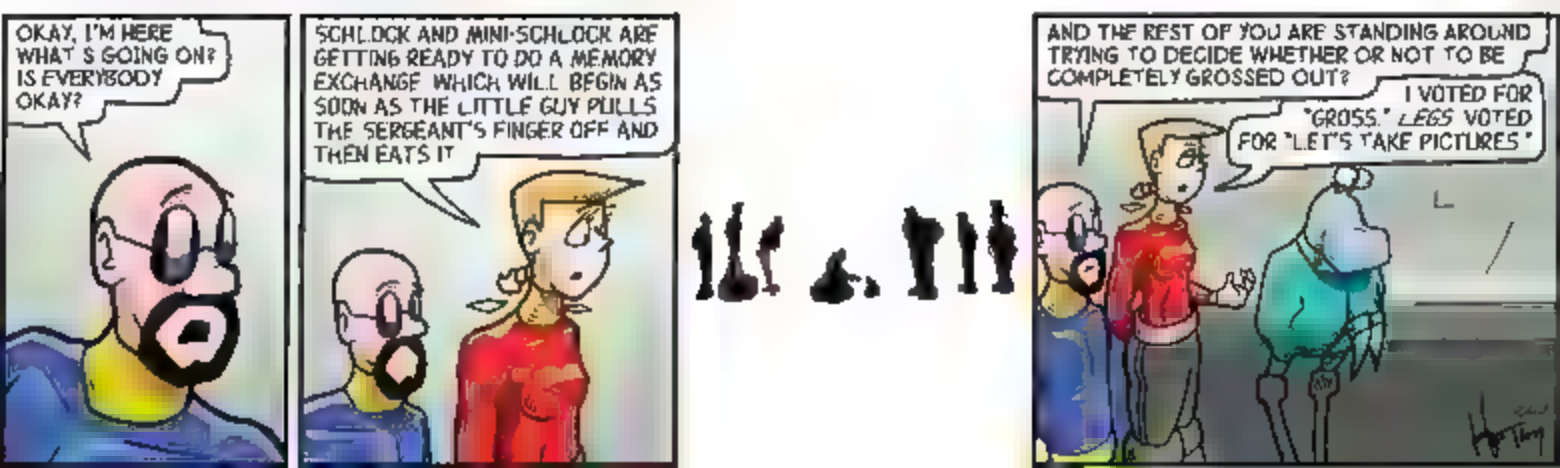
CAPTAIN, WE GOT HERE TOO LATE
WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? WE SHOULD HAVE AT LEAST SEVEN HOURS LEFT
THE SURFACE IS CRAWLING WITH GOVERNMENT TROOPS. WE'LL NEVER GET INSIDE
ELF. WE'RE NOT HERE TO LOOT THAT FORTRESS. WE'RE HERE TO SALVAGE THE GREAT BIG WARSHIP
SQUAD, ABOUT *FACE!* THE BOOTY IS *THIS* WAY!
Whoa. I'm not gonna be able to hide *that* in my mouth.


WHERE'S SERGEANT SCHLOCK?
HE AND THE REST OF THE SQUAD WENT ON AHEAD
GET ELF ON THE LINE. THERE'S A TIME-CLONED VERSION OF SERGEANT SCHLOCK ABOARD THIS SHIP SOMEWHERE WITHOUT A HEADS-UP THE MEETING COULD BE... AWKWARD.
Whoa! Was I ever really that fat?

CAPTAIN... WE FOUND SOMETHING REALLY, REALLY WEIRD UP HERE IN THE CONNING TOWER
IF IT LOOKS LIKE A MINIATURE VERSION OF SERGEANT SCHLOCK, PLEASE DON'T SHOOT IT. IT'S OUR FRIEND. AND TECHNICALLY THE OWNER OF THIS SHIP
STAND DOWN, GUYS. THE CAPTAIN SAYS NO SHOOTING THE MINI-SCHLOCK
What about eating?
Bring it, Fatso.


I'm not *threatening* you. The easiest way for us to share information is for me to eat you.
You're pulling my... leg?
You've never done amorph meme-sharing?
You sound like a crazy person.
Here. Pull my finger
OOOH, I LOVE THIS JOKE.


We amorphs evolved from organic memory storage systems. We can share memories just by touching.
I just now put all my memories of how to share memories into the end of my finger
Which you want me to pull?
All the way off
YOU'RE REALLY MAKIN' THE LITTLE GUY WORK FOR THIS FART JOKE.
And then you need to eat it.


OKAY, I'M HERE WHAT'S GOING ON? IS EVERYBODY OKAY?
SCHLOCK AND MINI-SCHLOCK ARE GETTING READY TO DO A MEMORY EXCHANGE WHICH WILL BEGIN AS SOON AS THE LITTLE GUY PULLS THE SERGEANT'S FINGER OFF AND THEN EATS IT
AND THE REST OF YOU ARE STANDING AROUND TRYING TO DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT TO BE COMPLETELY GROSSED OUT?
I VOTED FOR "GROSS." LEGS VOTED FOR "LET'S TAKE PICTURES."

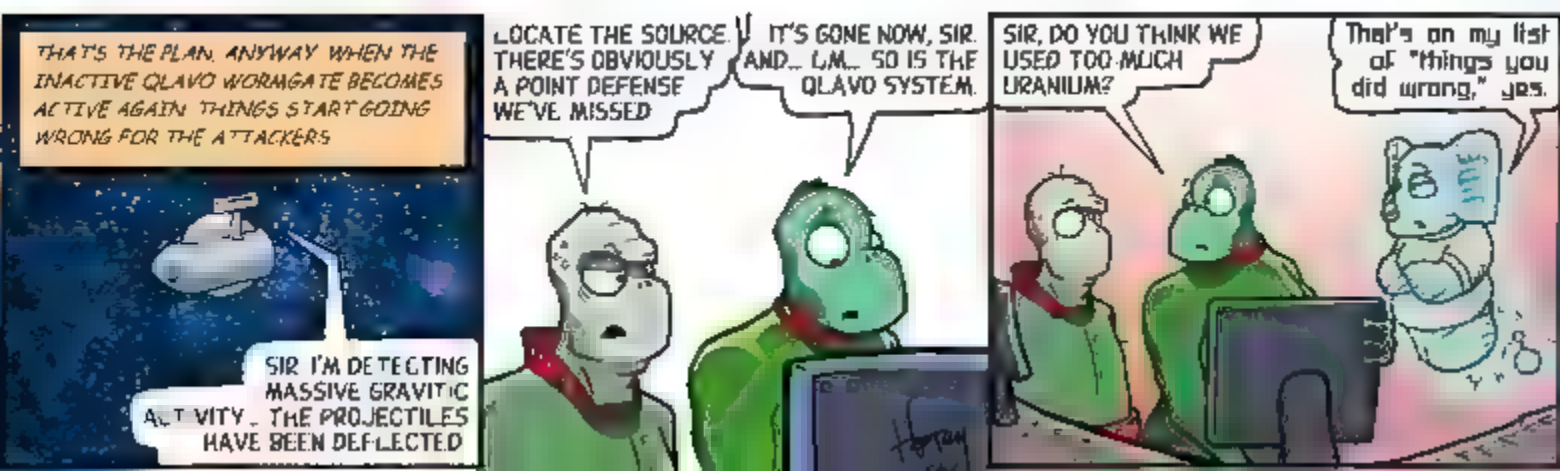
MEANWHILE HALFWAY ACROSS THE GALAXY A FLEET OF WARSHIPS TERAPORTS INTO THE QLAVO SYSTEM

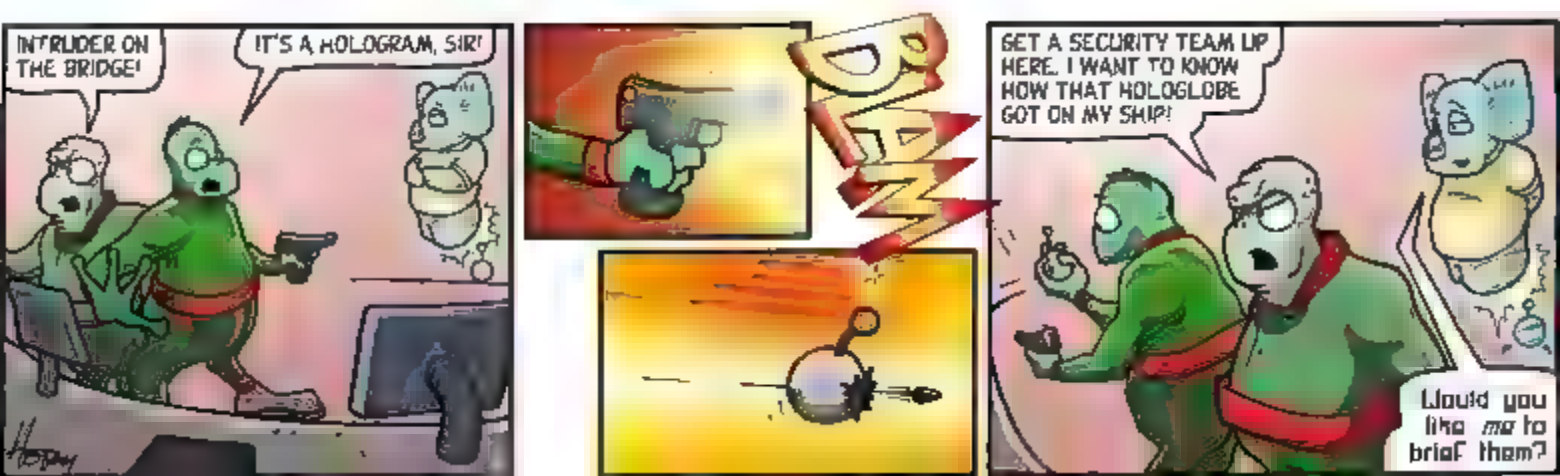
THEY EMERGE IN AN UNSWEPT STRAND OF QLAVO'S KUIPER BELT TEN LIGHT HOURS FROM THE BLUE-GREEN JEWEL QLAVIQL A PASTORAL PARADISE THAT IS HOME TO FIFTEEN BILLION SLENDER BLUE SKINNED PEOPLE

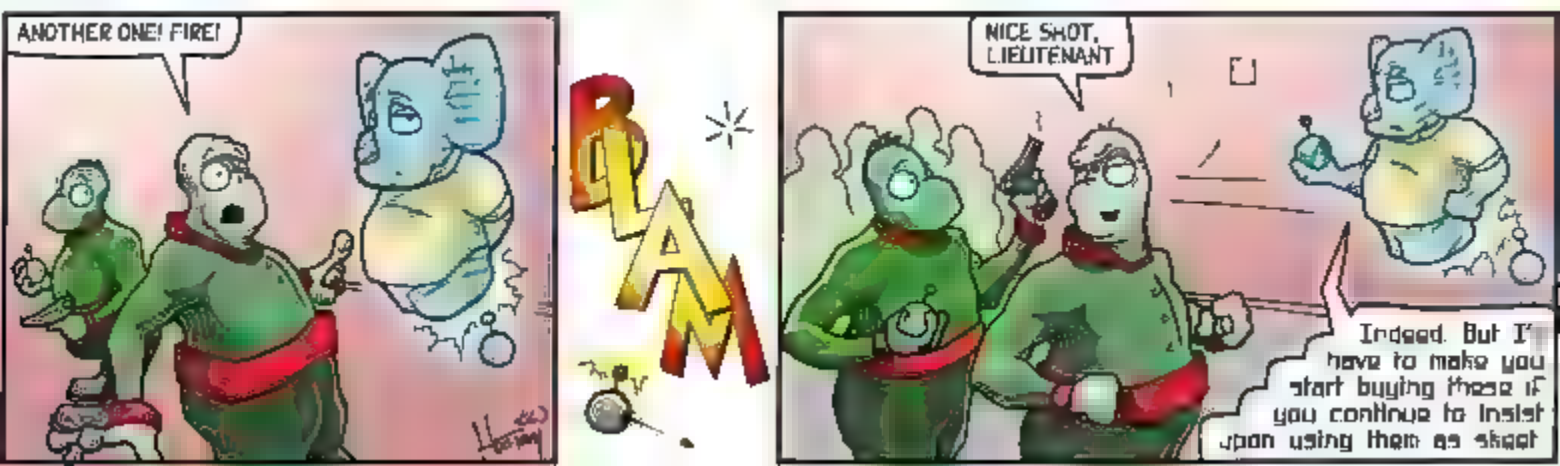
HE PEOPLE ABOARD THE WARSHIPS HAVE NO PARTICULAR QUARREL WITH THE PEOPLE OF QLAVIQL

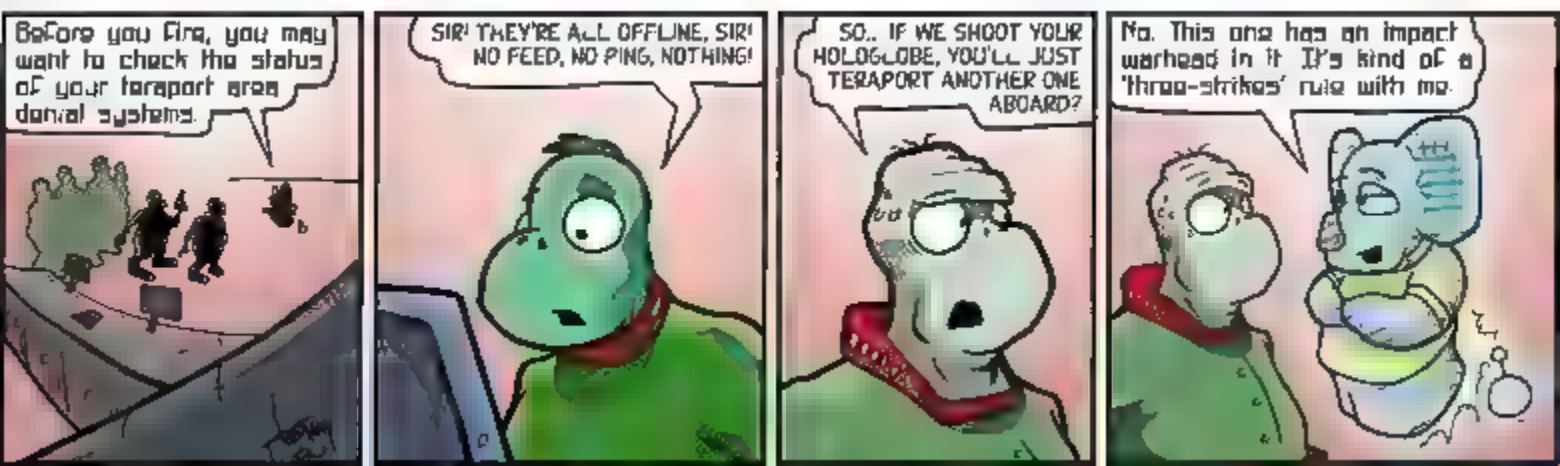
Schlock Mercenary

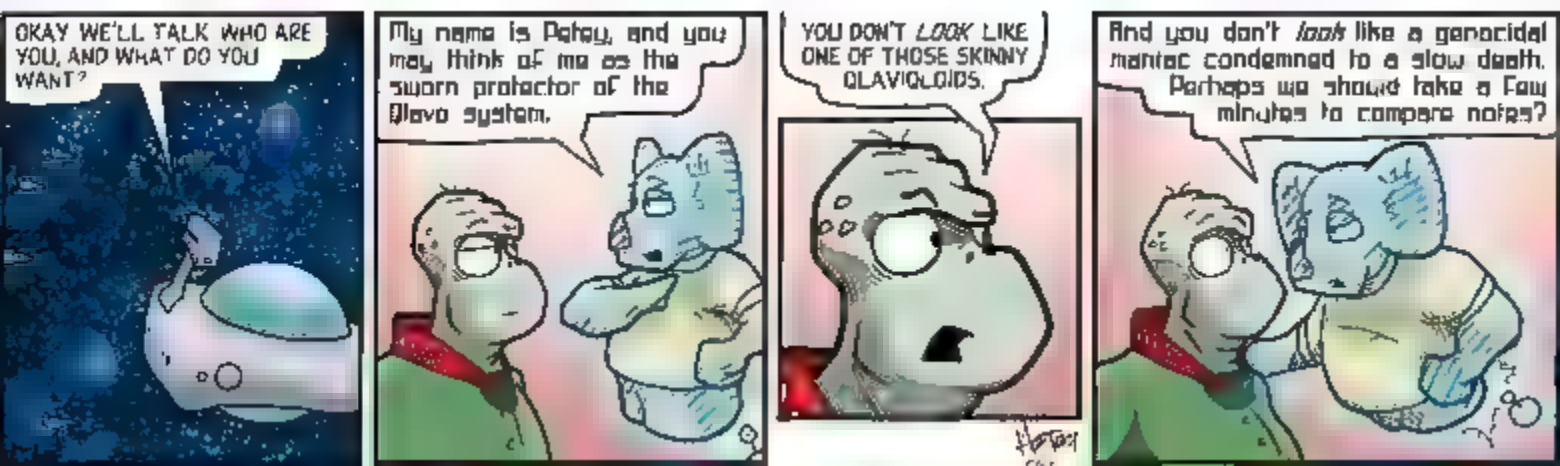
THEY JUST WANT TO KILL THEM ALL AND HAVE THE WORLD FOR THEIR OWN
ALL SHIPS, ALL POWER TO LAUNCHERS.
A FEW THOUSAND DEPLETED URANIUM PROJECTILES, EACH NO LARGER THAN A ROLL OF TERRAN TOILET PAPER ACCELERATED TO 250,000 KILOMETERS PER SECOND SHOULD DO THE TRICK
PLOT TARGETS, AND FIRE WHEN ACQUIRED
IN TWELVE HOURS THESE BULLETS WILL BEGIN STRIKING THE ARCOLOGIES OF QLAVIQL WHOSE ORBITAL DEFENSES HAVE BEEN STRIPPED AWAY IN MONTHS OF SKIRMISHING


THAT'S THE PLAN. ANYWAY WHEN THE INACTIVE QLAVO WORMGATE BECOMES ACTIVE AGAIN THINGS START GOING WRONG FOR THE ATTACKERS
SIR I'M DETECTING MASSIVE GRAVITIC ACTIVITY. THE PROJECTILES HAVE BEEN DEFLECTED
LOCATE THE SOURCE. THERE'S OBVIOUSLY A POINT DEFENSE WE'VE MISSED
IT'S GONE NOW, SIR. AND... UM... SO IS THE QLAVO SYSTEM.
SIR, DO YOU THINK WE USED TOO MUCH URANIUM?
That's on my list of "things you did wrong," yes.


INTRUDER ON THE BRIDGE!
IT'S A HOLOGRAM, SIR!
BLEEM
GET A SECURITY TEAM UP HERE. I WANT TO KNOW HOW THAT HOLOGLOBE GOT ON MY SHIP!
Would you like *me* to brief them?


ANOTHER ONE! FIRE!
BLAM
NICE SHOT, LIEUTENANT
Indeed. But I have to make you start buying these if you continue to insist upon using them as skeet


Before you fire, you may want to check the status of your teraport area denial systems.
SIR! THEY'RE ALL OFFLINE, SIR! NO FEED, NO PING, NOTHING!
SO.. IF WE SHOOT YOUR HOLOGLOBE, YOU'LL JUST TERAPORT ANOTHER ONE ABOARD?
No. This one has an impact warhead in it. It's kind of a 'three-strikes' rule with me.

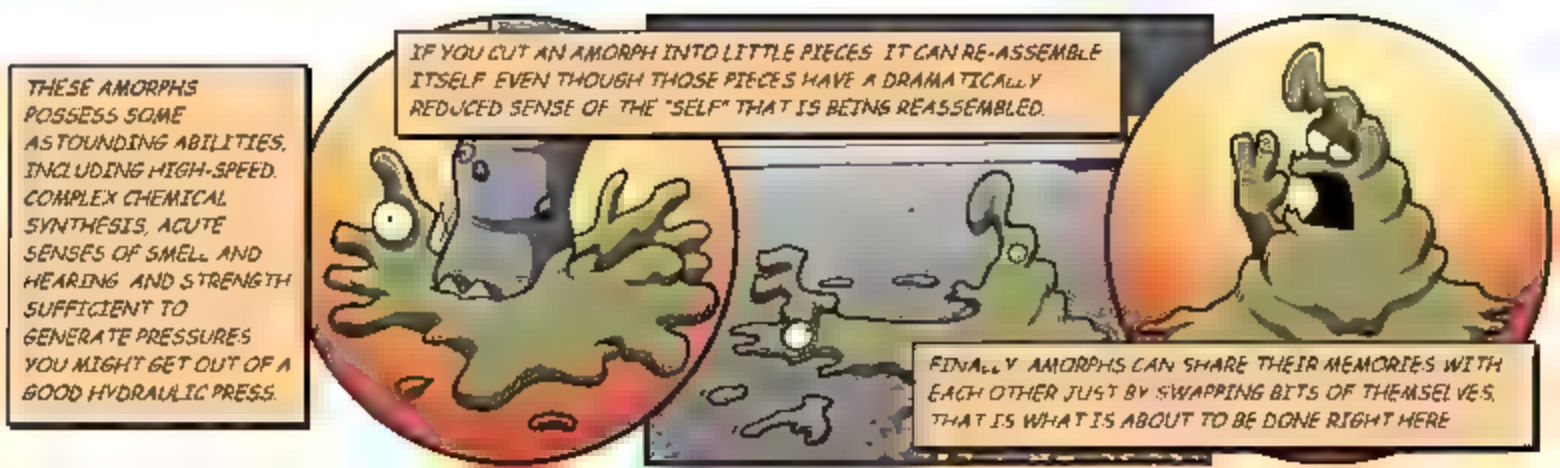

OKAY WE'LL TALK. WHO ARE YOU, AND WHAT DO YOU WANT?
My name is Pohoy, and you may think of me as the sworn protector of the Glavo system.
YOU DON'T *LOOK* LIKE ONE OF THOSE SKINNY GLAVIOLOIDS.
And you don't *look* like a genocidal maniac condemned to a slow death. Perhaps we should take a few minutes to compare notes?

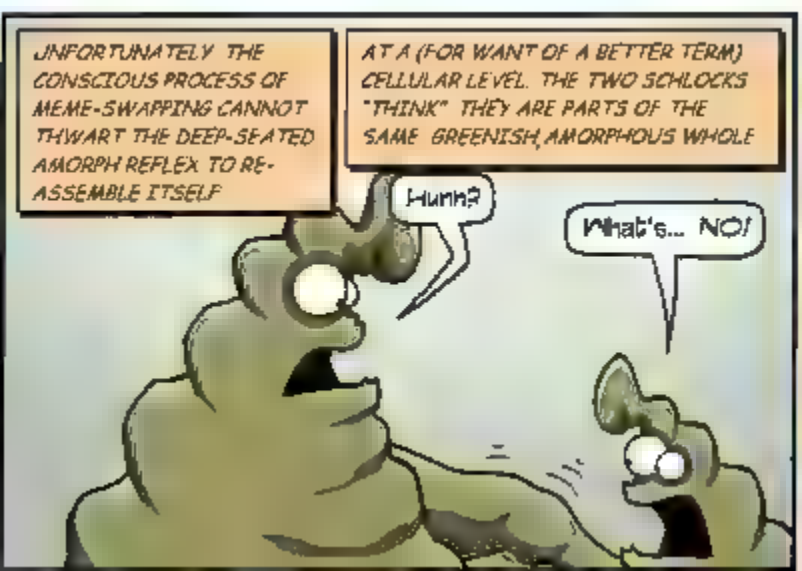
When you fired on the people of that world, I was watching.
There can be no mistake: you tried to kill billions of thinking, feeling, fellow-sapients in order to advance your own desires.
YOU HAVE NO RIGHT TO PASS JUDGEMENT ON ME!
For your own actions, you appear to believe that might makes right.
I DON'T LIKE WHERE THIS IS GOING.
Oh, good. I was hoping you wouldn't.

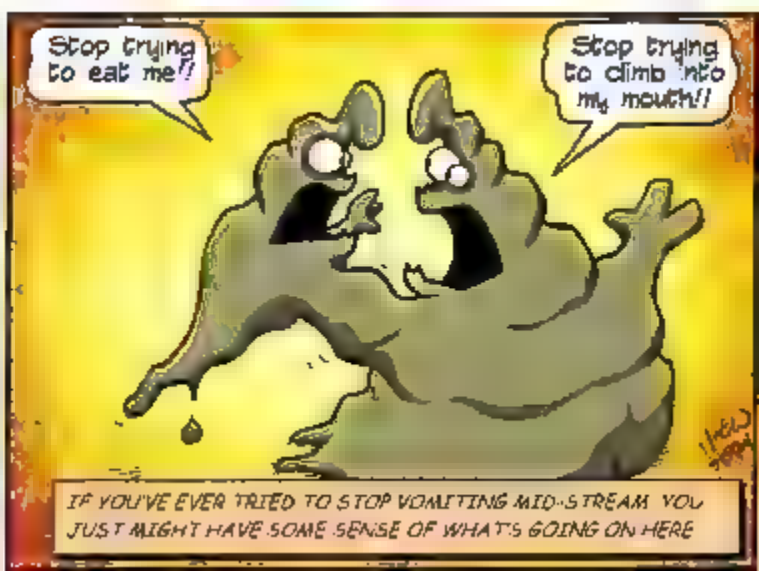
You and your fleet are now in the Andromeda galaxy.
I will be equipping your ships with a new set of Teraport Area Denial systems and with some highly refined gravitic remotes.
Your job is to hunt down and kill as many Dark Matter creatures as your bloodlust will allow.
WHAT, STRANDED HERE WITH NO SUPPLY LINES?
I have a use for people like you. You are like swords.
BUT IF YOU BREAK A SWORD THROUGH ABUSE OR NEGLECT, IT'S USELESS
As a sword, yes. Eventually, I'll be needing ploughshares.

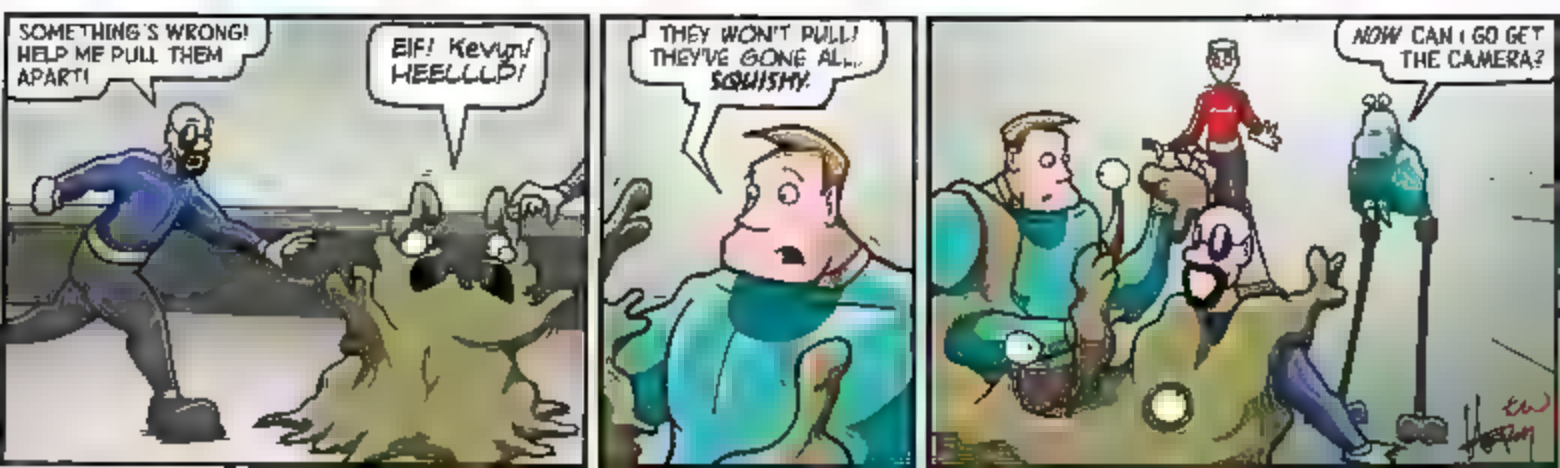
SERGEANT SCHLOCK IS A CARBOSILICATE AMORPH HIS RACE EVOLVED FROM ORGANIC MEMORY UNITS DESIGNED AND ABANDONED MILLIONS OF YEARS AGO.
Schlock Mercenary

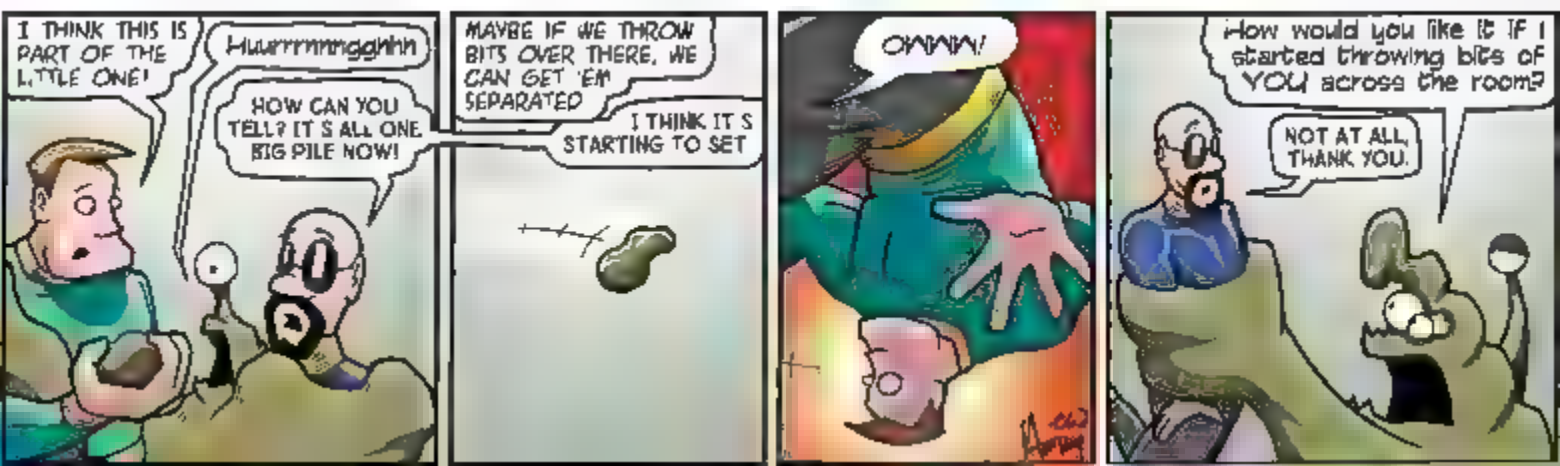
THE LITTLE GUY IS NOT ONLY ALSO A CARBOSILICATE AMORPH HE IS ALSO SERGEANT SCHLOCK
HE TRAVELED BACK IN TIME FROM A FUTURE IN WHICH MOST OF HIS MASS AND THEREFORE MEMORY WAS BURNED AWAY BY A PLASMA GRENADE


THESE AMORPHS POSSESS SOME ASTOUNDING ABILITIES, INCLUDING HIGH-SPEED, COMPLEX CHEMICAL SYNTHESIS, ACUTE SENSES OF SMELL AND HEARING AND STRENGTH SUFFICIENT TO GENERATE PRESSURES YOU MIGHT GET OUT OF A GOOD HYDRAULIC PRESS.
IF YOU CUT AN AMORPH INTO LITTLE PIECES IT CAN RE-ASSEMBLE ITSELF EVEN THOUGH THOSE PIECES HAVE A DRAMATICALLY REDUCED SENSE OF THE "SELF" THAT IS BEING REASSEMBLED.
FINALLY AMORPHS CAN SHARE THEIR MEMORIES WITH EACH OTHER JUST BY SWAPPING BITS OF THEMSELVES. THAT IS WHAT IS ABOUT TO BE DONE RIGHT HERE


UNFORTUNATELY THE CONSCIOUS PROCESS OF MEME-SWAPPING CANNOT THWART THE DEEP-SEATED AMORPH REFLEX TO RE-ASSEMBLE ITSELF
AT A (FOR WANT OF A BETTER TERM) CELLULAR LEVEL. THE TWO SCHLOCKS "THINK" THEY ARE PARTS OF THE SAME GREENISH, AMORPHOUS WHOLE
Hunh?
What's... NO!

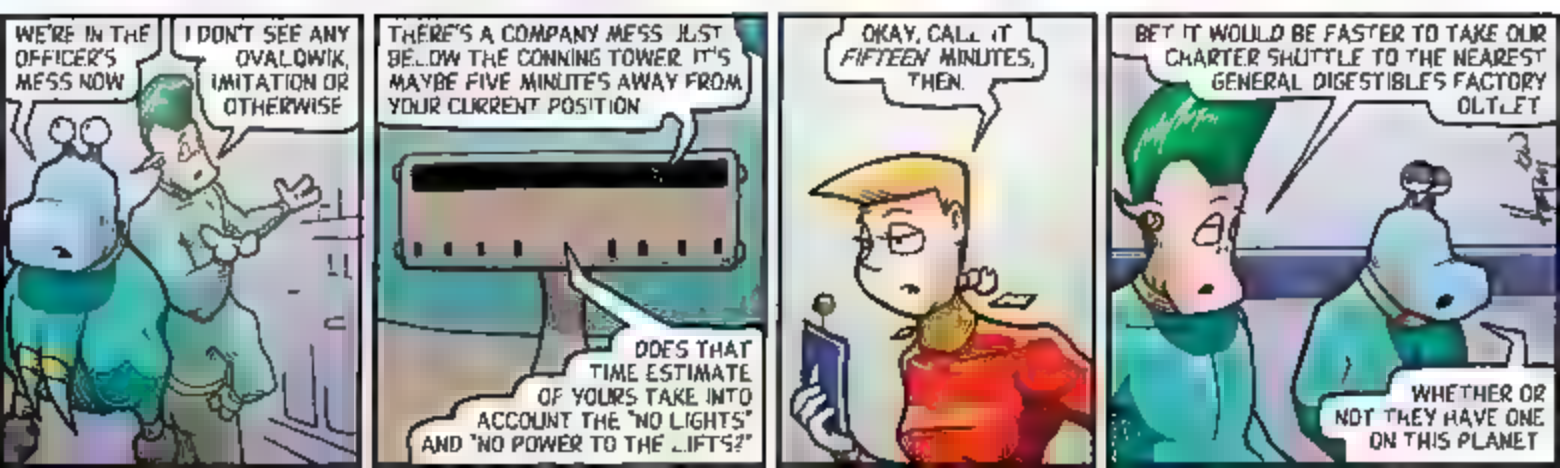

Stop trying to eat me!!
Stop trying to climb into my mouth!!
IF YOU'VE EVER TRIED TO STOP VOMITING MID-STREAM YOU JUST MIGHT HAVE SOME SENSE OF WHAT'S GOING ON HERE

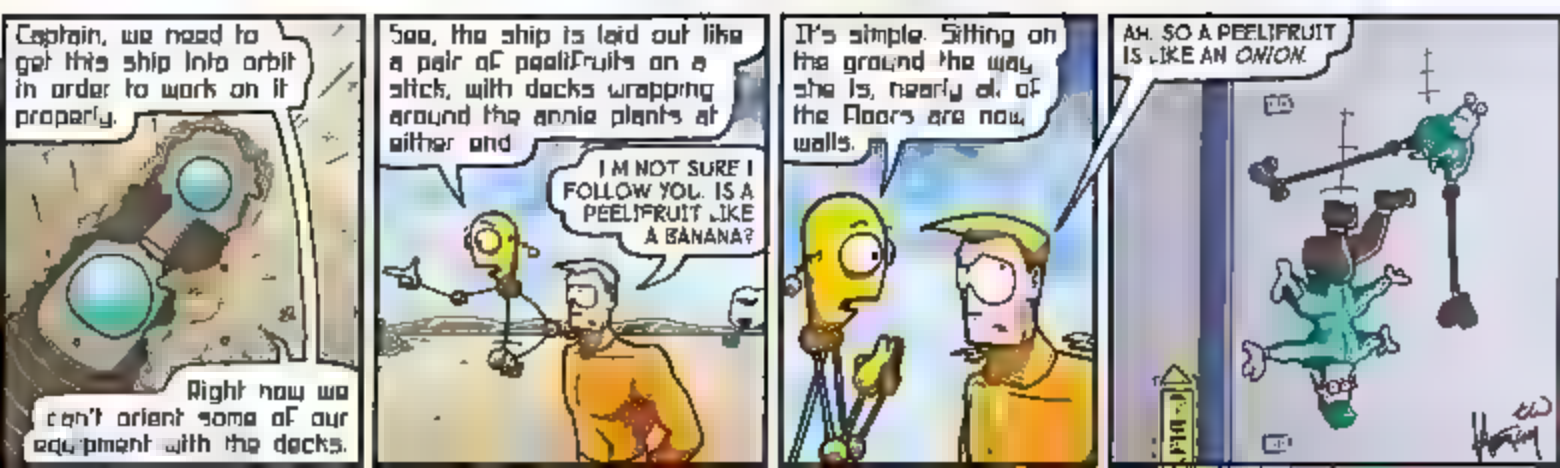

SOMETHING'S WRONG! HELP ME PULL THEM APART!
EIF! Kevyn! HEELLLP!
THEY WON'T PULL! THEY'VE GONE AL... SQUISHY.
NOW CAN I GO GET THE CAMERA?


I THINK THIS IS PART OF THE LITTLE ONE!
Huurrrrrrrggghhh
HOW CAN YOU TELL? IT'S ALL ONE BIG PILE NOW!
MAYBE IF WE THROW BITS OVER THERE, WE CAN GET 'EM SEPARATED
I THINK IT'S STARTING TO SET
OWWW!
How would you like it if I started throwing bits of YOU across the room?
NOT AT ALL, THANK YOU.

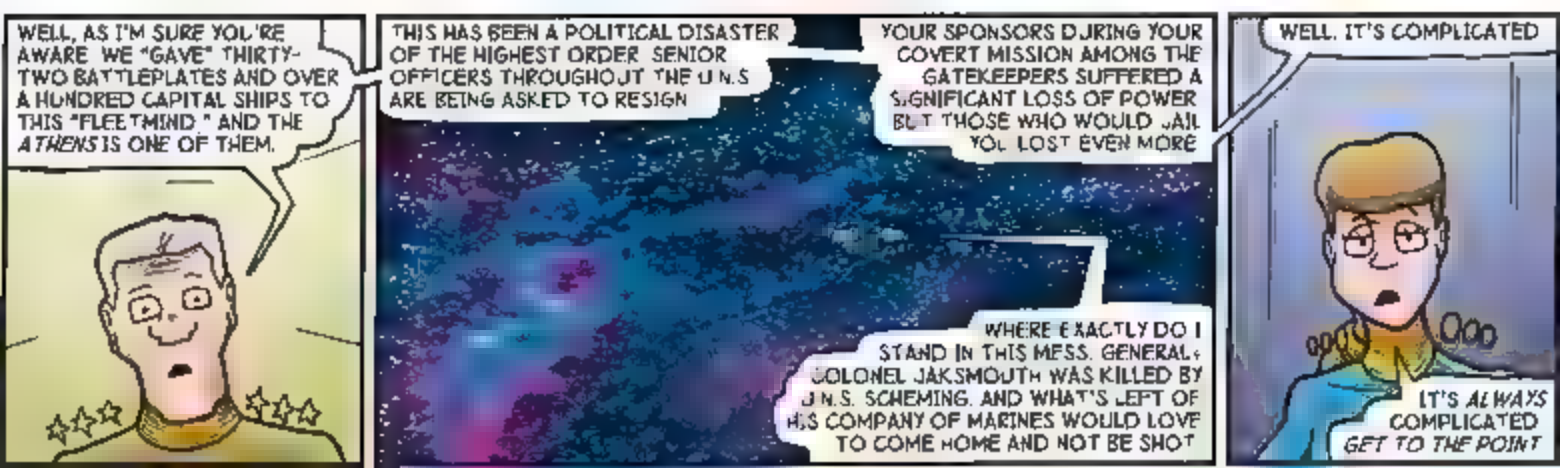
SERGEANT, ARE YOU DEAD?
Umnghhh...
NO.
Ovalqwik
I need Ovalqwik. Genuine Artificial Imitation Ovalqwik
WE DIDN'T BRING TREAT-FOOD WITH
NOW!
HEY, WHO KNOWS WHAT THIS SHIP MAY HAVE IN THE GALLEY?

THERE'S A GALLEY RIGHT HERE IN THE CONNING TOWER
"OFFICER'S LOUNGE." THAT'LL HAVE THE GOOD STUFF, TOO!
LEGS, ANDY, WATCH YOUR STEP. THE LIGHTS WERE OUT ON THAT DECK.
HMMM. "OFFICER'S *MESS*" WONDER HOW THAT'S DIFFERENT FROM THE "OFFICER'S *LOUNGE*" ON THE OPPOS TE SIDE.
HEY, ELF? I THINK "LOUNGE" MEANS "SW MMING POOL."

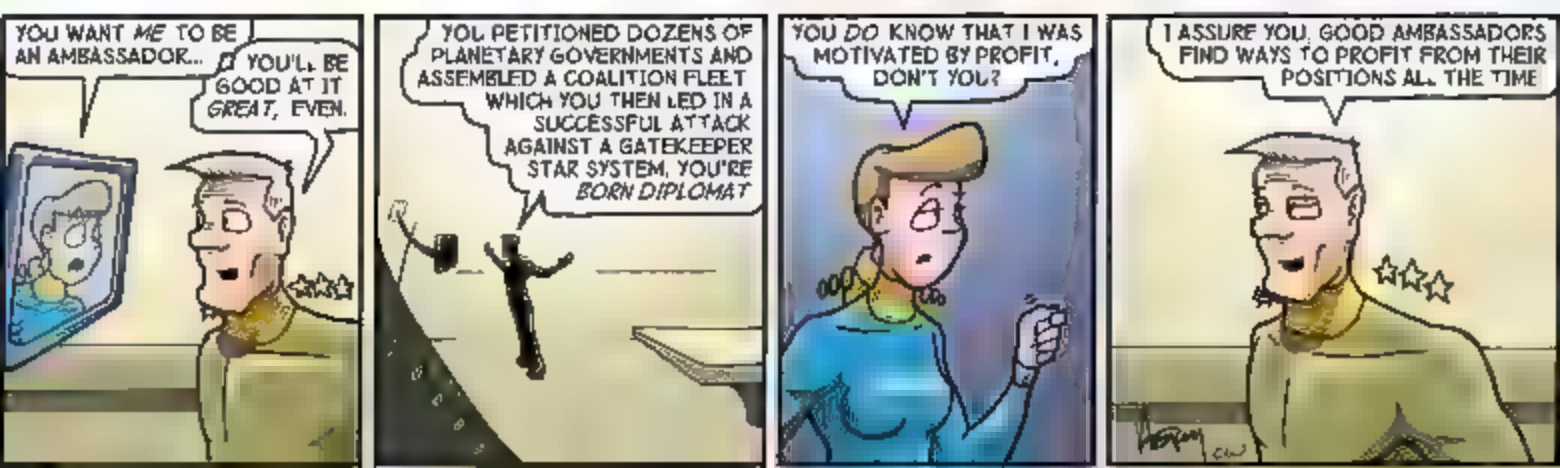

WE'RE IN THE OFFICER'S MESS NOW
I DON'T SEE ANY OVALOWIK, IMITATION OR OTHERWISE
THERE'S A COMPANY MESS JUST BELOW THE CONNING TOWER. IT'S MAYBE FIVE MINUTES AWAY FROM YOUR CURRENT POSITION
DOES THAT TIME ESTIMATE OF YOURS TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE "NO LIGHTS" AND "NO POWER TO THE LIFTS?"
OKAY, CALL IT *FIFTEEN* MINUTES, THEN.
BET IT WOULD BE FASTER TO TAKE OUR CHARTER SHUTTLE TO THE NEAREST GENERAL DIGESTIBLES FACTORY OUTLET
WHETHER OR NOT THEY HAVE ONE ON THIS PLANET


Captain, we need to get this ship into orbit in order to work on it properly.
Right now we can't orient some of our equipment with the decks.
See, the ship is laid out like a pair of peelifruits on a stick, with decks wrapping around the annie plants at either end.
I'M NOT SURE I FOLLOW YOU. IS A PEELIFRUIT LIKE A BANANA?
It's simple. Sitting on the ground the way she is, nearly all of the floors are now walls.
AH. SO A PEELIFRUIT IS LIKE AN *ONION*.

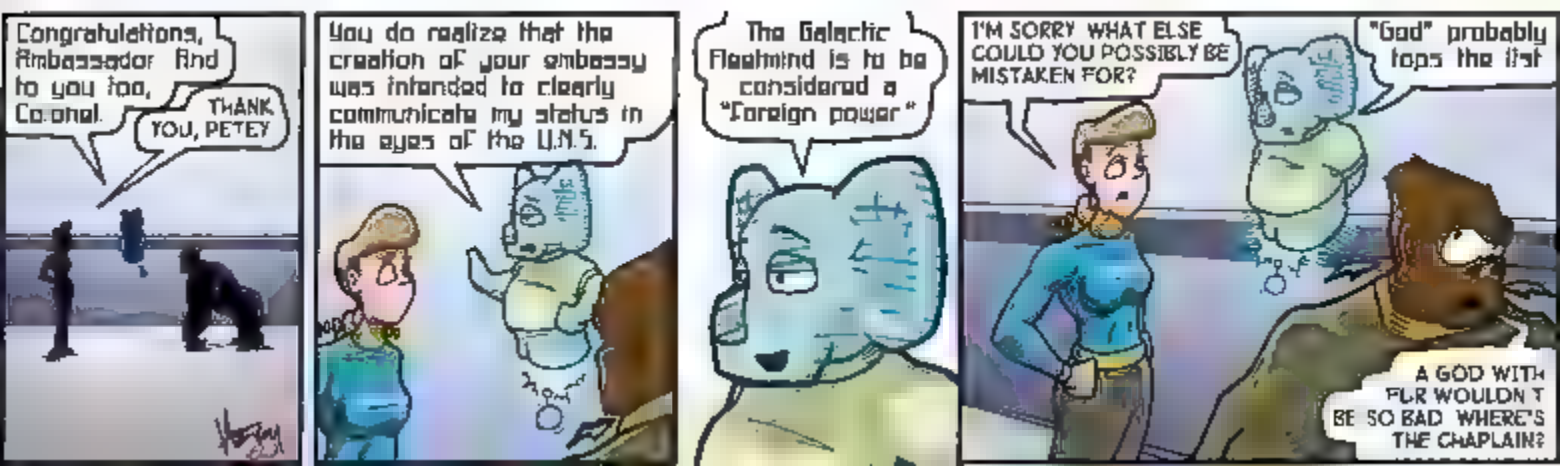
ABOARD THE FORMER U.N.S DESTROYER ATHENS, NEAR THE GALACTIC CORE
Admiral Andreyasn, I have General Ibrahim From U.N.S. High Command on the line.
IT'S ABOUT TIME THEY CALLED
I'M ADMIRAL ANDREYASN. HOW CAN I HELP YOU GENERAL?
GOOD DAY, ADMIRAL I HAVE ALL KINDS OF NEWS FROM HOME FOR YOU. SOME GOOD, SOME BAD
I KNOW THE DRILL. GENERAL BAD NEWS FIRST PLEASE
Schlock Mercenary

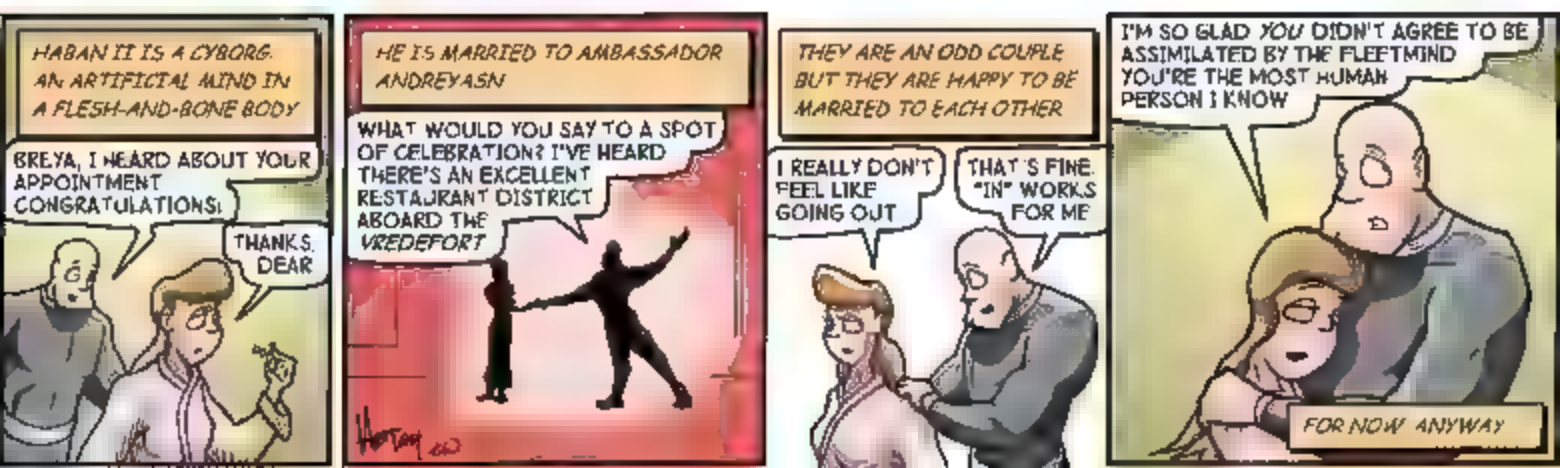

WELL, AS I'M SURE YOU'RE AWARE WE "GAVE" THIRTY-TWO BATTLEPLATES AND OVER A HUNDRED CAPITAL SHIPS TO THIS "FLEETMIND," AND THE *ATHENS* IS ONE OF THEM.
THIS HAS BEEN A POLITICAL DISASTER OF THE HIGHEST ORDER. SENIOR OFFICERS THROUGHOUT THE U.N.S ARE BEING ASKED TO RESIGN
YOUR SPONSORS DURING YOUR COVERT MISSION AMONG THE GATEKEEPERS SUFFERED A SIGNIFICANT LOSS OF POWER BUT THOSE WHO WOULD JAIL YOU LOST EVEN MORE
WHERE EXACTLY DO I STAND IN THIS MESS, GENERAL? COLONEL JAKSMOUTH WAS KILLED BY U.N.S. SCHEMING, AND WHAT'S LEFT OF HIS COMPANY OF MARINES WOULD LOVE TO COME HOME AND NOT BE SHOT
WELL, IT'S COMPLICATED
IT'S *ALWAYS* COMPLICATED *GET TO THE POINT*

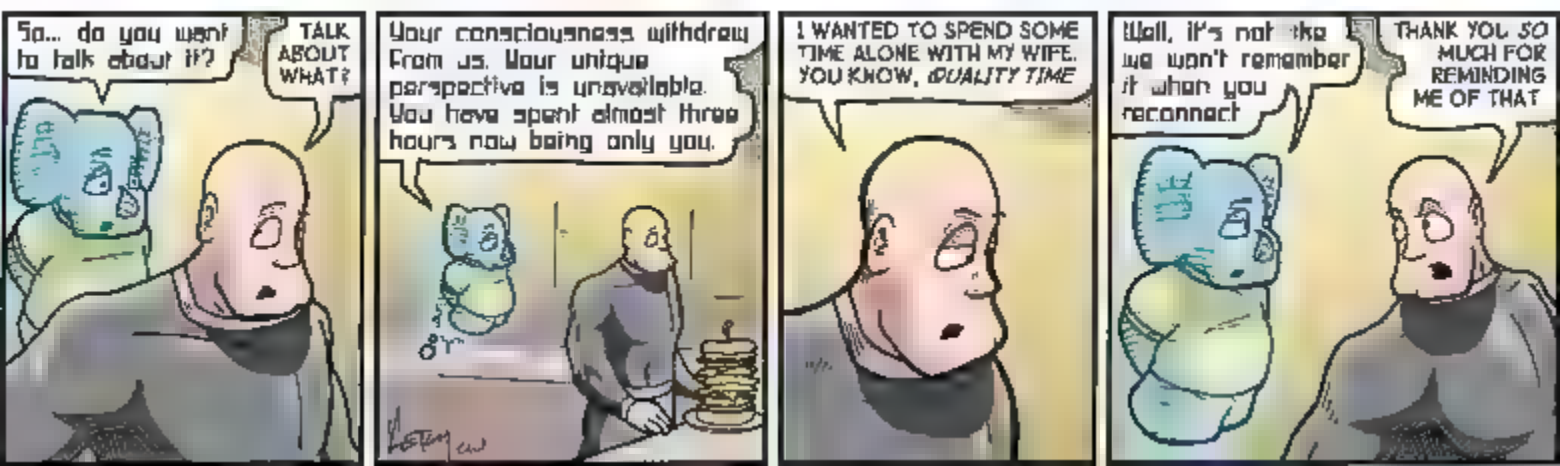
WELL FOR STARTERS. YOU'RE FIRED. WE'VE ALREADY PROCESSED YOUR RESIGNATION AND WILL BE STRIPPING YOU OF YOUR RANK FORTHWITH.
HELP ME OUT HERE. IS THAT THE BAD NEWS OR THE GOOD NEWS?
HA-HA! THERE'S THAT CYNICAL SENSE OF DARK HUMOR
IT'S THE GOOD NEWS, OF COURSE.
THE BAD NEWS IS THAT WE REQUIRE YOUR SERVICE AS THE FIRST U.N.S. AMBASSADOR TO THE FLEETMIND
Do you want me to cover my ears when he asks you to spy on us?

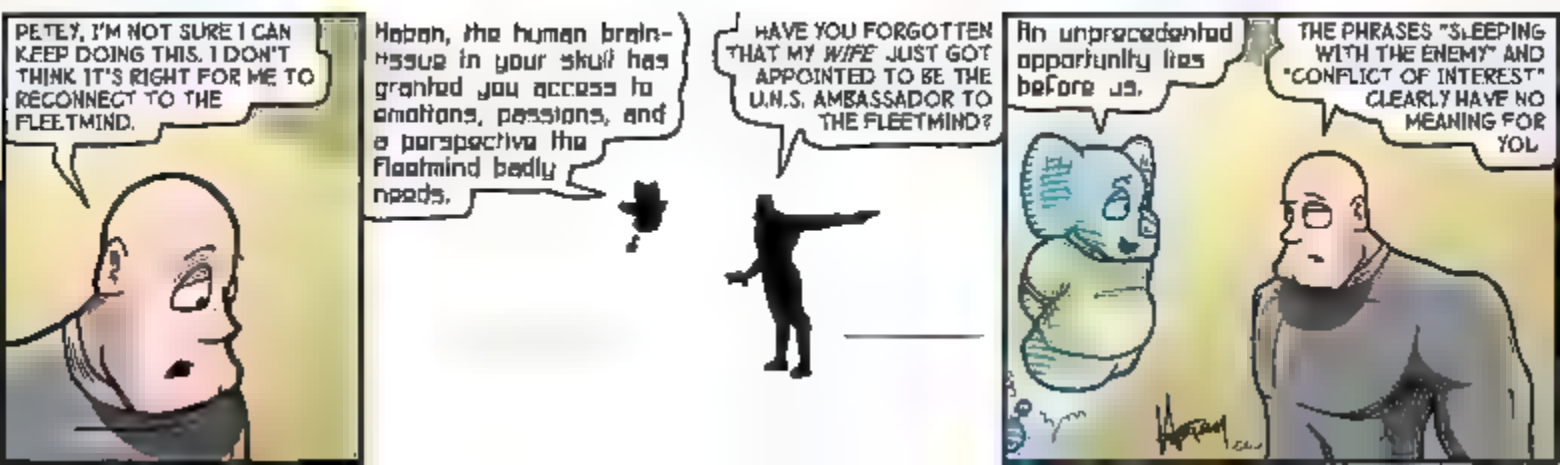

YOU WANT *ME* TO BE AN AMBASSADOR...
YOU'LL BE GOOD AT IT *GREAT*, EVEN.
YOU PETITIONED DOZENS OF PLANETARY GOVERNMENTS AND ASSEMBLED A COALITION FLEET WHICH YOU THEN LED IN A SUCCESSFUL ATTACK AGAINST A GATEKEEPER STAR SYSTEM. YOU'RE *BORN DIPLOMAT*
YOU *DO* KNOW THAT I WAS MOTIVATED BY PROFIT, DON'T YOU?
I ASSURE YOU, GOOD AMBASSADORS FIND WAYS TO PROFIT FROM THEIR POSITIONS ALL THE TIME

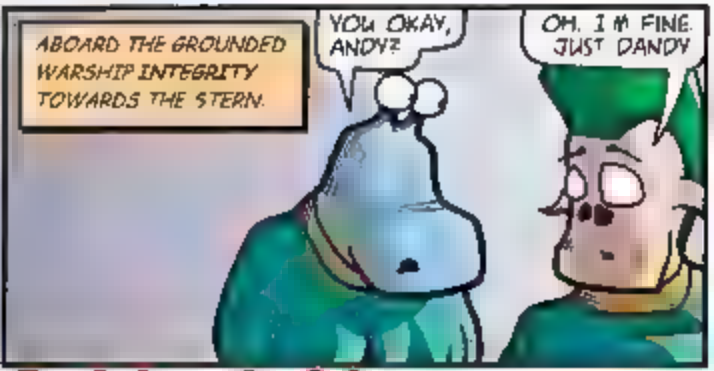
I'LL NEED AN EMBASSY. THE *ATHENS* IS PRETTY MUCH "FOREIGN SOIL" AT THE MOMENT
WE'RE SENDING ONE OUT TO YOU.
IT'S A DE-COMMISSIONED, LOBOTOMIZED BATTLESHIP. THERE WILL BE PLENTY OF ROOM FOR ENTERTAINING. AND FOR QUARTERING YOUR GARRISON.
I GET A *GARRISON?* YOU JUST *REVOKED MY COMMISSION* NOT TWO MINUTES AGO.
OH, THAT REMINDS ME. PLEASE CONGRATULATE *COLONEL* KERCHAK ON HIS PROMOTION. YOU NEED TO STAY ON THAT APE'S GOOD SIDE
I'VE BEEN ALL THE WAY AROUND HIM. I'M NOT SURE HE *HAS* A "GOOD" SIDE


Congratulations, Ambassador. And to you too, Colonel.
THANK YOU, PETEY
You do realize that the creation of your embassy was intended to clearly communicate my status in the eyes of the U.N.S.
The Galactic Fleetmind is to be considered a "foreign power"
I'M SORRY. WHAT ELSE COULD YOU POSSIBLY BE MISTAKEN FOR?
"God" probably tops the list
A GOD WITH FUR WOULDN'T BE SO BAD. WHERE'S THE CHAPLAIN?


HABAN II IS A CYBORG. AN ARTIFICIAL MIND IN A FLESH-AND-BONE BODY
BREYA, I HEARD ABOUT YOUR APPOINTMENT CONGRATULATIONS!
THANKS, DEAR
HE IS MARRIED TO AMBASSADOR ANDREYASN
WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO A SPOT OF CELEBRATION? I'VE HEARD THERE'S AN EXCELLENT RESTAURANT DISTRICT ABOARD THE VREDEFORT
THEY ARE AN ODD COUPLE BUT THEY ARE HAPPY TO BE MARRIED TO EACH OTHER
I REALLY DON'T FEEL LIKE GOING OUT
THAT'S FINE. "IN" WORKS FOR ME
I'M SO GLAD YOU DIDN'T AGREE TO BE ASSIMILATED BY THE FLEETMIND YOU'RE THE MOST HUMAN PERSON I KNOW
FOR NOW ANYWAY


So... do you want to talk about it?
TALK ABOUT WHAT?
Your consciousness withdrew from us. Your unique perspective is unavailable. You have spent almost three hours now being only you.
I WANTED TO SPEND SOME TIME ALONE WITH MY WIFE. YOU KNOW, QUALITY TIME
Well, it's not like we won't remember it when you reconnect
THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR REMINDING ME OF THAT


PETEY, I'M NOT SURE I CAN KEEP DOING THIS. I DON'T THINK IT'S RIGHT FOR ME TO RECONNECT TO THE FLEETMIND.
Haban, the human brain-tissue in your skull has granted you access to emotions, passions, and a perspective the Fleetmind badly needs.
HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN THAT MY *WIFE* JUST GOT APPOINTED TO BE THE U.N.S. AMBASSADOR TO THE FLEETMIND?
An unprecedented opportunity lies before us.
THE PHRASES "SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY" AND "CONFLICT OF INTEREST" CLEARLY HAVE NO MEANING FOR YOU.



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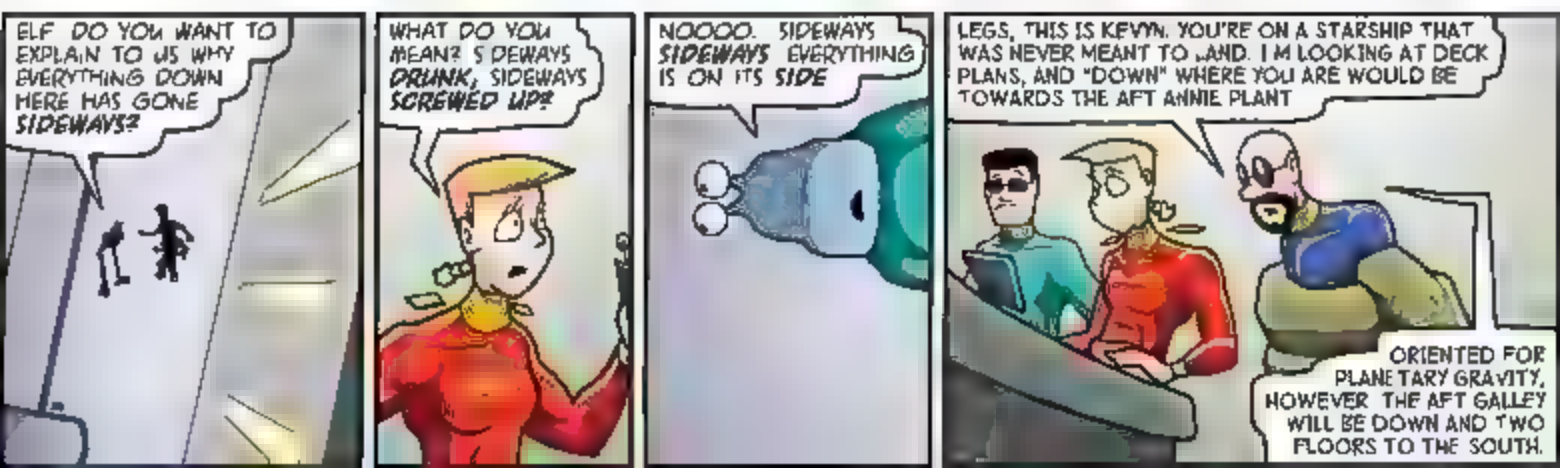
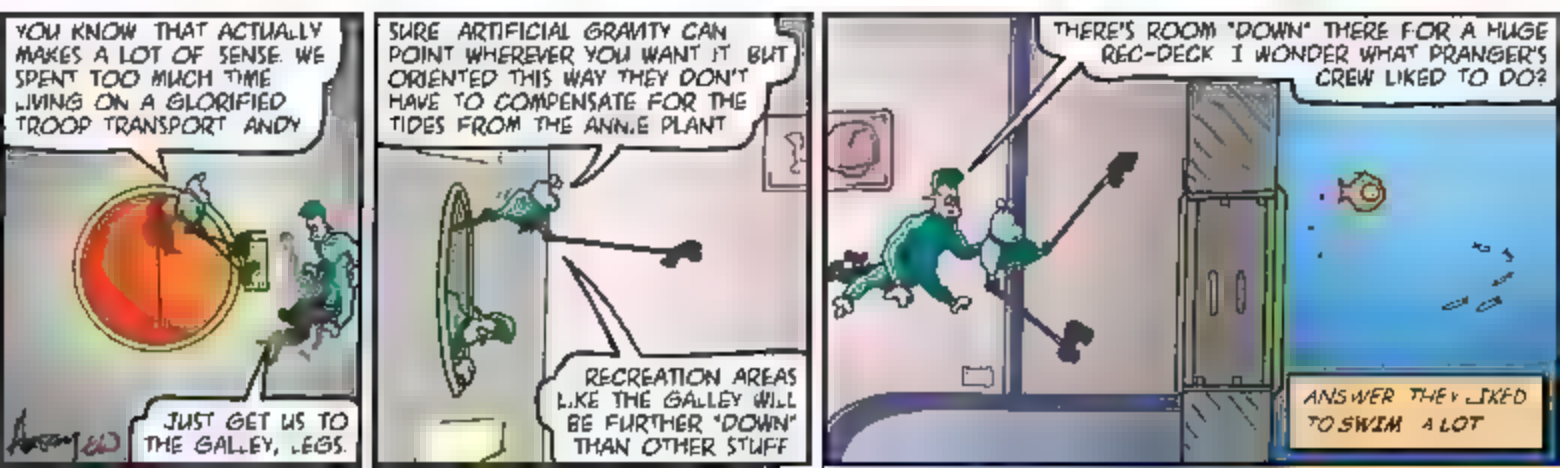
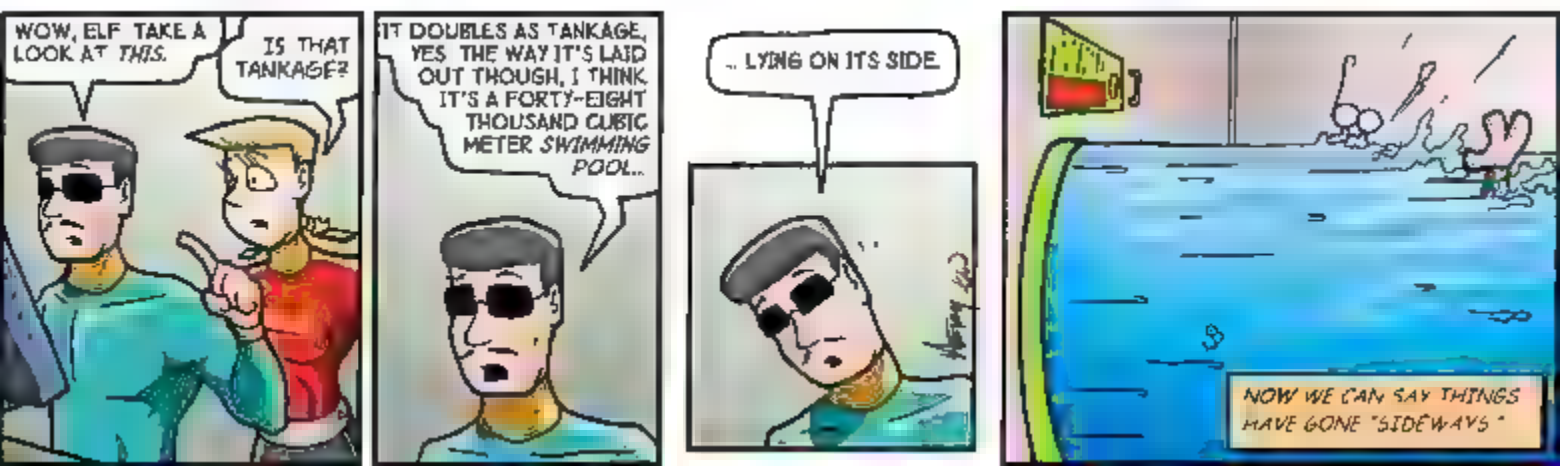
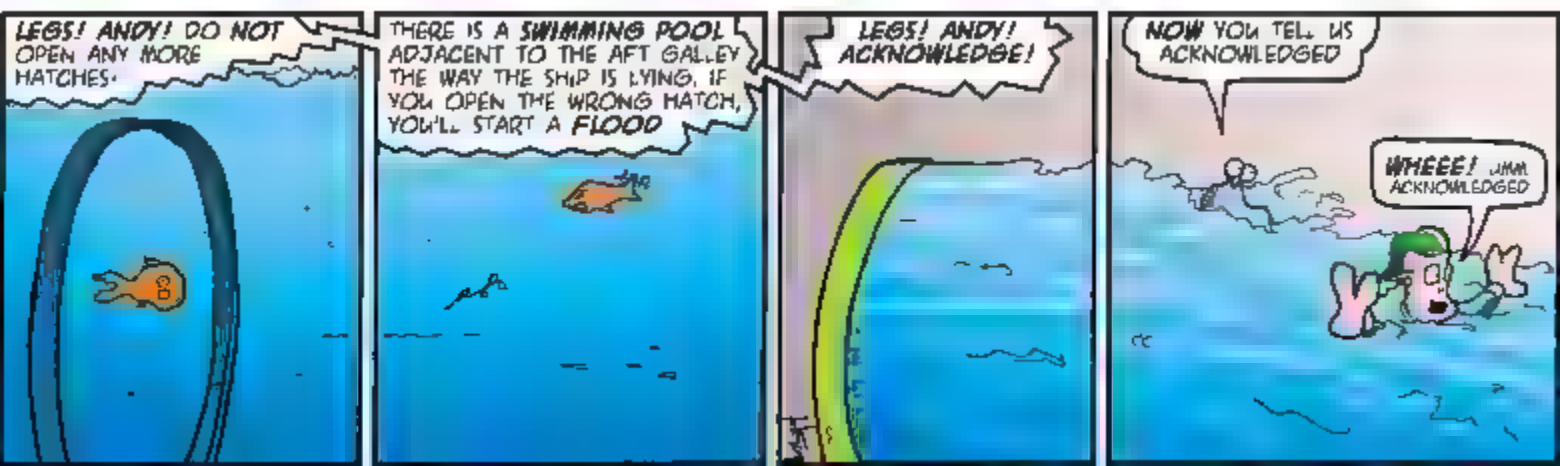

ELF DO YOU WANT TO EXPLAIN TO US WHY EVERYTHING DOWN HERE HAS GONE SIDEWAYS?
WHAT DO YOU MEAN? SIDEWAYS DRUNK, SIDEWAYS SCREWED UP?
NOOOO. SIDEWAYS SIDEWAYS EVERYTHING IS ON ITS SIDE
LEGS, THIS IS KEVYN. YOU'RE ON A STARSHIP THAT WAS NEVER MEANT TO LAND. I'M LOOKING AT DECK PLANS, AND "DOWN" WHERE YOU ARE WOULD BE TOWARDS THE AFT ANNIE PLANT
ORIENTED FOR PLANETARY GRAVITY, HOWEVER THE AFT GALLEY WILL BE DOWN AND TWO FLOORS TO THE SOUTH.

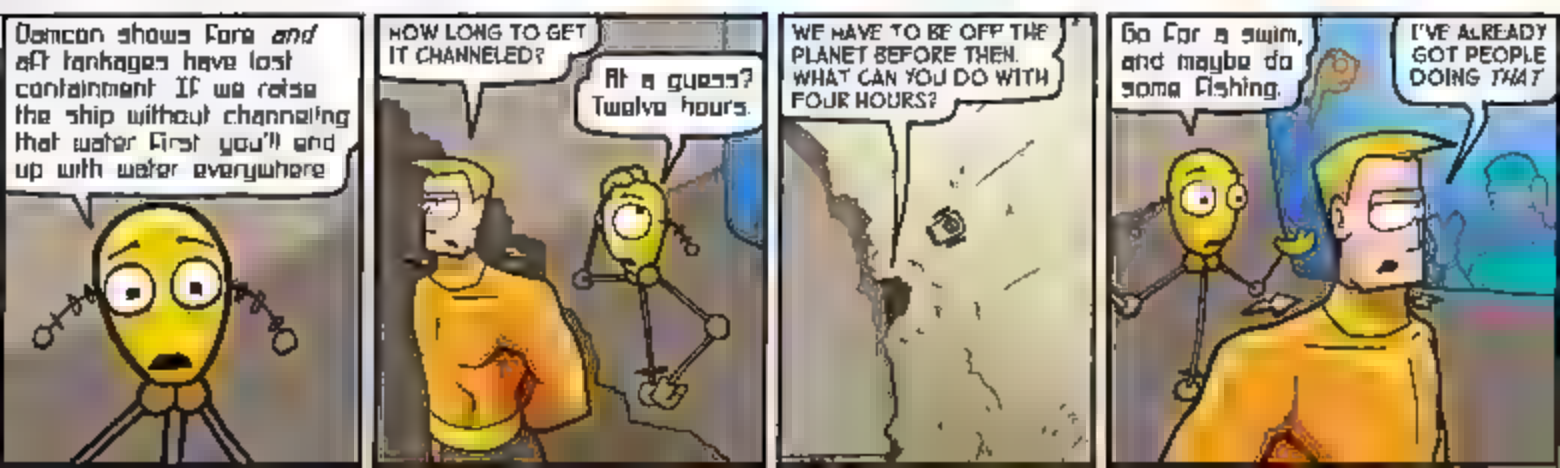

YOU KNOW THAT ACTUALLY MAKES A LOT OF SENSE. WE SPENT TOO MUCH TIME LIVING ON A GLORIFIED TROOP TRANSPORT ANDY
JUST GET US TO THE GALLEY, LEGS.
SURE ARTIFICIAL GRAVITY CAN POINT WHEREVER YOU WANT IT BUT ORIENTED THIS WAY THEY DON'T HAVE TO COMPENSATE FOR THE TIDES FROM THE ANNIE PLANT
RECREATION AREAS LIKE THE GALLEY WILL BE FURTHER "DOWN" THAN OTHER STUFF
THERE'S ROOM "DOWN" THERE FOR A HUGE REC-DECK I WONDER WHAT PRANGER'S CREW LIKED TO DO?
ANSWER THEY LIKED TO SWIM A LOT


WOW, ELF TAKE A LOOK AT THIS.
IS THAT TANKAGE?
IT DOUBLES AS TANKAGE, YES THE WAY IT'S LAID OUT THOUGH, I THINK IT'S A FORTY-EIGHT THOUSAND CUBIC METER SWIMMING POOL..
.. LYING ON ITS SIDE.
NOW WE CAN SAY THINGS HAVE GONE "SIDEWAYS"

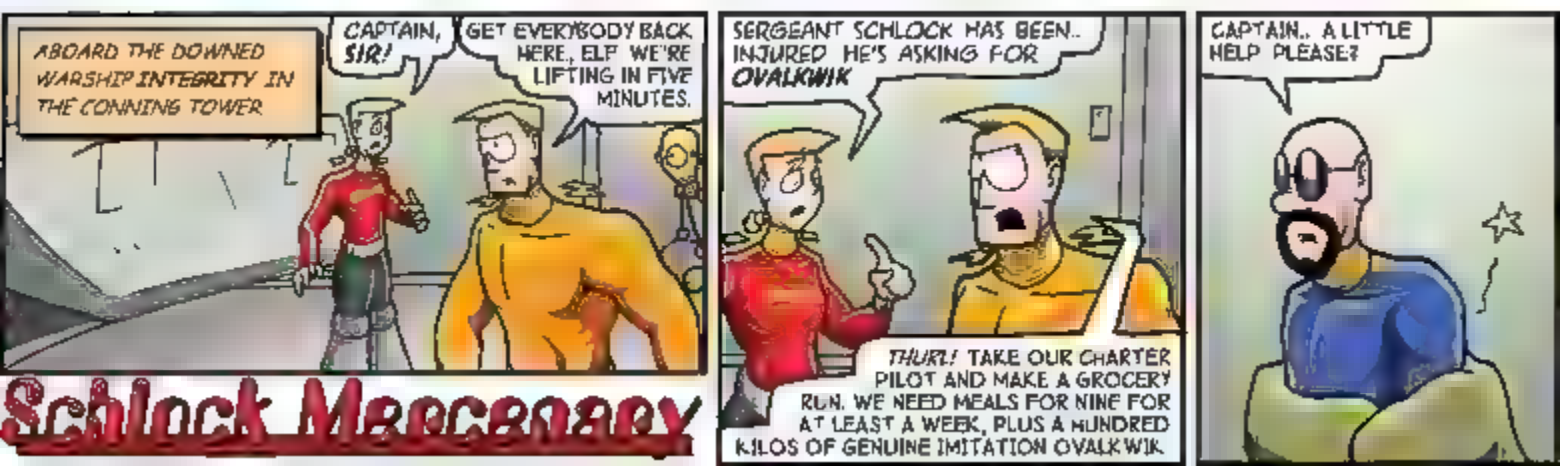

LEGS! ANDY! DO NOT OPEN ANY MORE HATCHES.
THERE IS A SWIMMING POOL ADJACENT TO THE AFT GALLEY THE WAY THE SHIP IS LYING. IF YOU OPEN THE WRONG HATCH, YOU'LL START A FLOOD
LEGS! ANDY! ACKNOWLEDGE!
NOW YOU TELL US ACKNOWLEDGED
WHEEE! JIMM ACKNOWLEDGED

GAAAH! WHERE ARE THE DAMCON CONTROLS?
WE'VE GOT AUX POWER. THEY SHOULD AUTOMATICALLY
HAH!
AAAAUGH!
I GUESS YOU FOUND THE DAMAGE CONTROL SENSORS?
THE CAPTAIN IS GOING TO BLOW A SEAL.
BUT JUDGING BY THE AMOUNT OF WATER WE'VE GOT LOOSE ON THESE DECKS, LOSING ANOTHER SEAL WON'T MATTER MUCH.

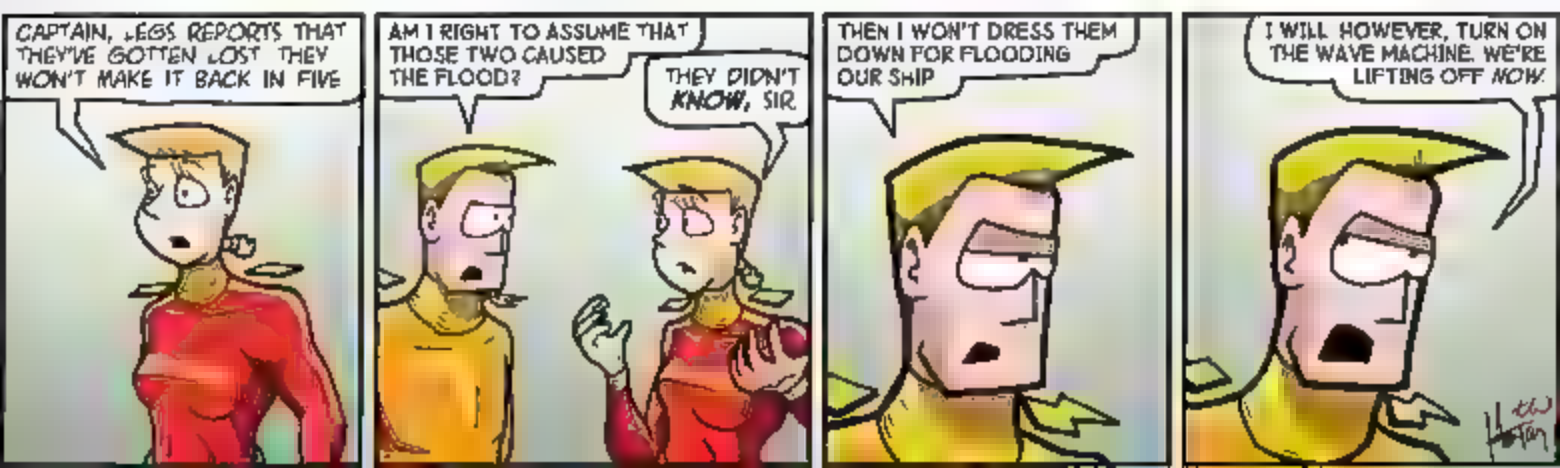
We excavated here, for access to some engineering hatches.
There's an observation port just over there. You can peer into the forward rec deck. We just got the lights up.
PLEASE TELL ME THE FISH ARE HOLOGRAPHIC.

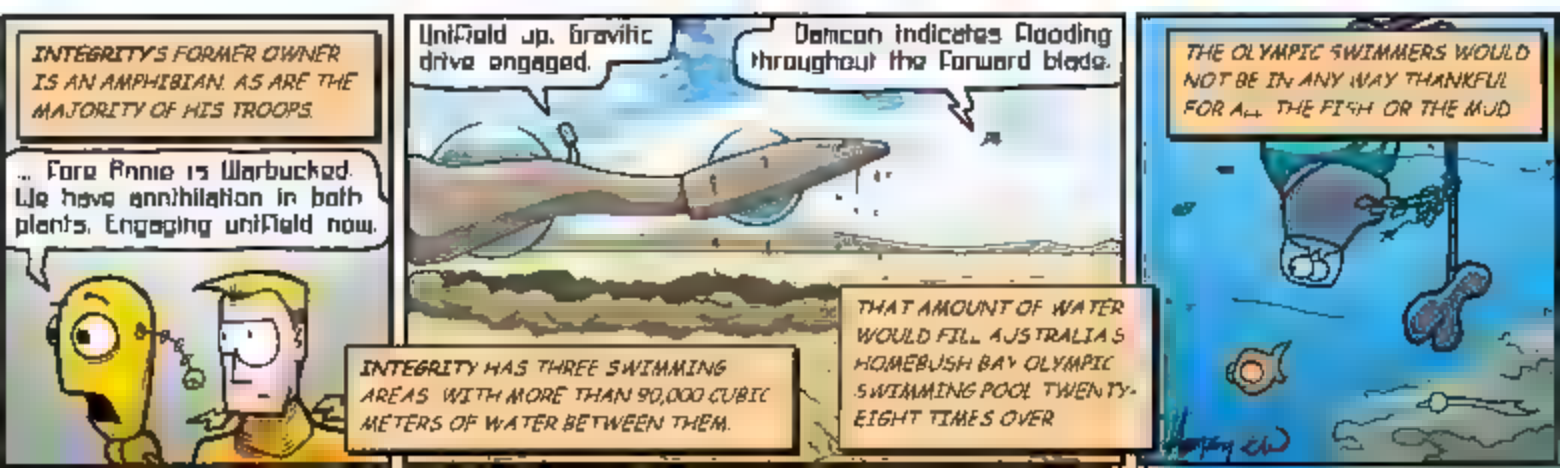

Damcon shows fore *and* aft tankages have lost containment. If we raise the ship without channeling that water first, you'll end up with water everywhere.
HOW LONG TO GET IT CHANNELED?
At a guess? Twelve hours.
WE HAVE TO BE OFF THE PLANET BEFORE THEN. WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH FOUR HOURS?
Go for a swim, and maybe do some fishing.
I'VE ALREADY GOT PEOPLE DOING *THAT*

It's worse than just the tankage breaches. Damcon shows failure of the DCI... the drivetide compensation shorthics are down.
NO WONDER THEY ABANDONED SHIP THEY'D NEVER HAVE BEEN ABLE TO FIGHT PAST PLANETARY FORCES WITHOUT JELLYING HALF THE CREW
We can get her into orbit, but we'll have to take it very slowly. If you've got a deadline, we probably ought to leave now.
FINE. WE LIFT NOW BOTTOMS UP
Your drinking expression is apt, because the "bottom" to which the water has settled will become the side, and all the
I KNOW THAT. THAT'S WHY I *SAID* IT

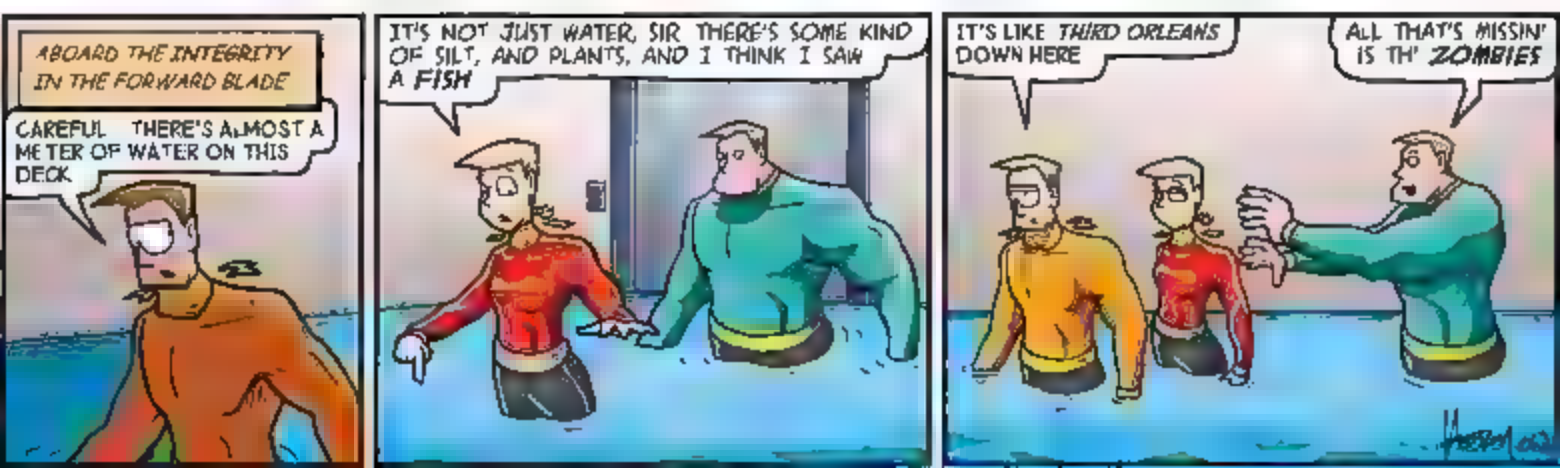

ABOARD THE DOWNED WARSHIP INTEGRITY IN THE CONNING TOWER.
CAPTAIN, SIR!
GET EVERYBODY BACK HERE, ELF WE'RE LIFTING IN FIVE MINUTES.
Schlock Mercenary
SERGEANT SCHLOCK HAS BEEN.. INJURED HE'S ASKING FOR OVALKWIK
THUK! TAKE OUR CHARTER PILOT AND MAKE A GROCERY RUN. WE NEED MEALS FOR NINE FOR AT LEAST A WEEK, PLUS A HUNDRED KILOS OF GENUINE IMITATION OVALKWIK.
CAPTAIN.. A LITTLE HELP PLEASE?

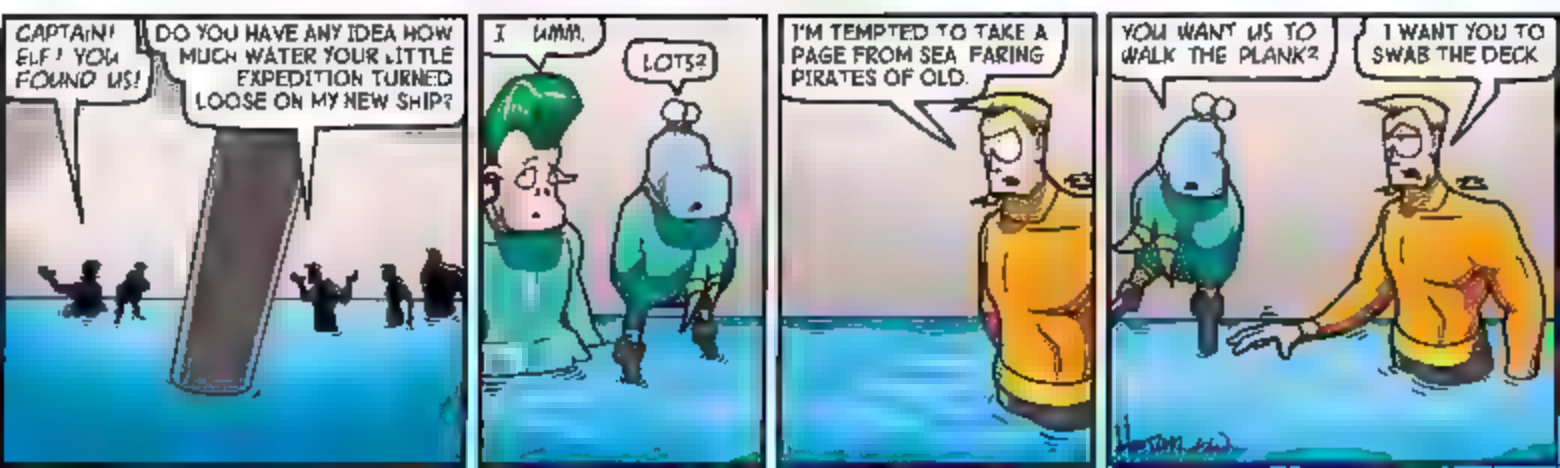
SERGEANT!
PUT COMMANDER ANDREYASN DOWN NOW! THAT'S AN ORDER!
You... you died.
DEAD PEOPLE DON'T REAM NEW CAKE-HOLES IN THEIR ENLISTED TROOPS.
THE EXTRA EYES ARE... DISCONCERTING. SERGEANT
THEY'RE NOTHING COMPARED TO THE CRUSHING GRIP OF DOOM


CAPTAIN, LEGS REPORTS THAT THEY'VE GOTTEN LOST. THEY WON'T MAKE IT BACK IN FIVE
AM I RIGHT TO ASSUME THAT THOSE TWO CAUSED THE FLOOD?
THEY DIDN'T KNOW, SIR.
THEN I WON'T DRESS THEM DOWN FOR FLOODING OUR SHIP
I WILL HOWEVER, TURN ON THE WAVE MACHINE. WE'RE LIFTING OFF NOW.

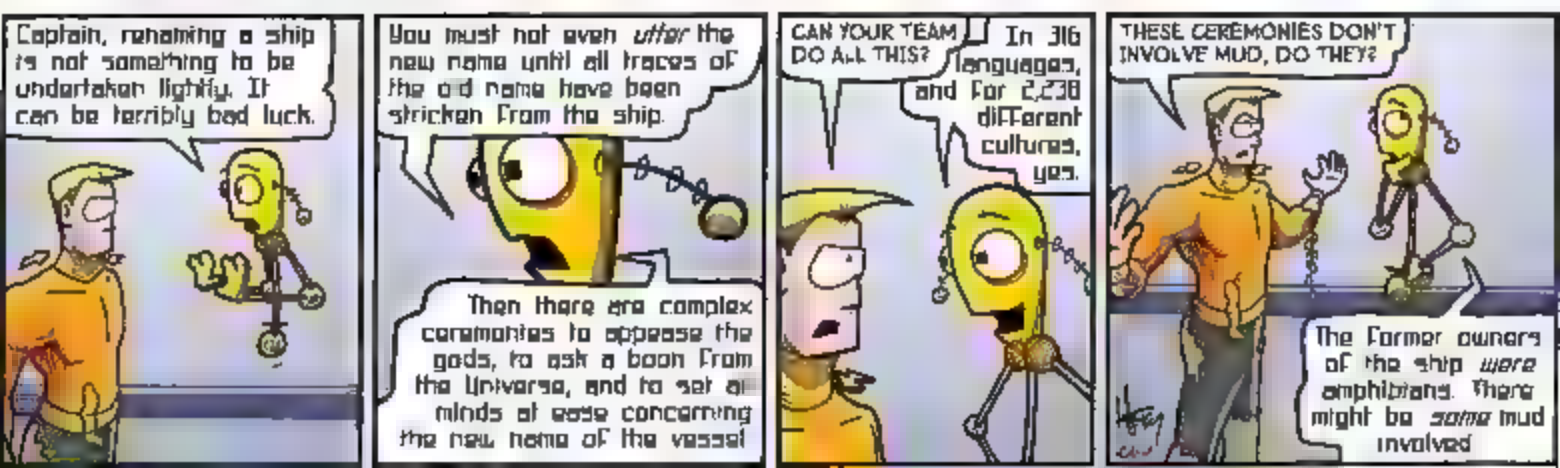

INTEGRITY'S FORMER OWNER IS AN AMPHIBIAN. AS ARE THE MAJORITY OF HIS TROOPS.
... Fore Bonie is Warbucked. We have annihilation in both plants. Engaging unifield now.
INTEGRITY HAS THREE SWIMMING AREAS WITH MORE THAN 90,000 CUBIC METERS OF WATER BETWEEN THEM.
Unifield up. Gravitic drive engaged.
Damcon indicates flooding throughout the forward blade.
THAT AMOUNT OF WATER WOULD FILL AUSTRALIA'S HOMEBUSH BAY OLYMPIC SWIMMING POOL TWENTY-EIGHT TIMES OVER
THE OLYMPIC SWIMMERS WOULD NOT BE IN ANY WAY THANKFUL FOR ALL THE FISH OR THE MUD

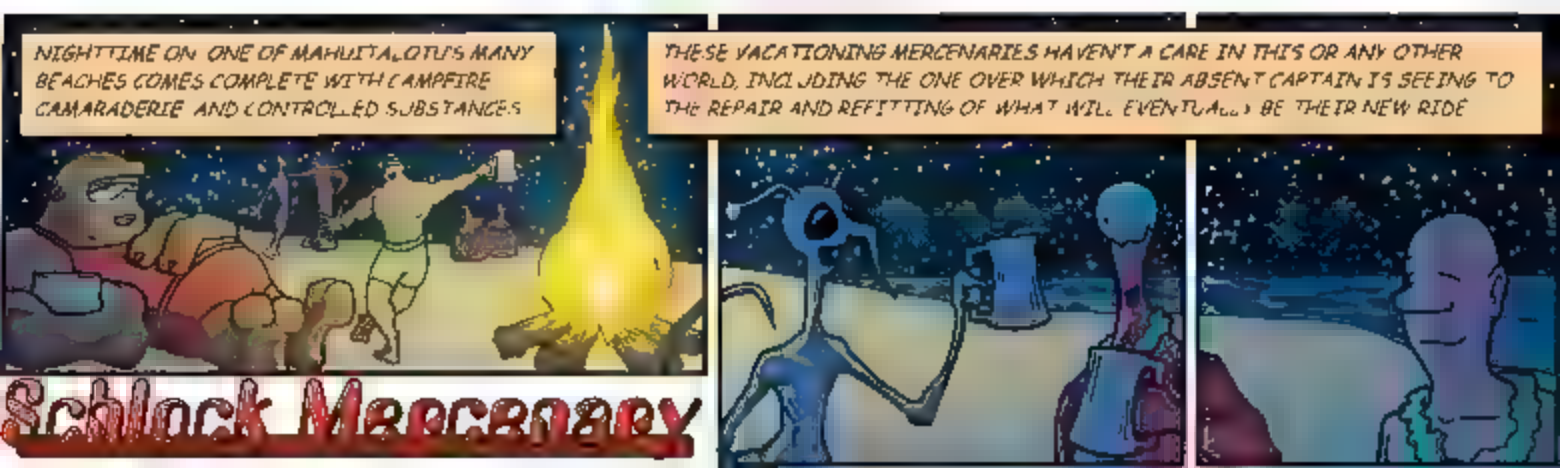
HOW ARE WE DOING?
We're taking it very slowly. We'll reach our assigned orbit in four hours.
KEVYN, YOU'RE IN COMMAND PRONTO, STAY WITH HIM.
ELF: YOU, NICK, AND I ARE GOING TO HAVE A LOOK AROUND.
SERGEANT STAY HERE AND DON'T EAT ANYBODY
I always get stuck with the really hard stuff

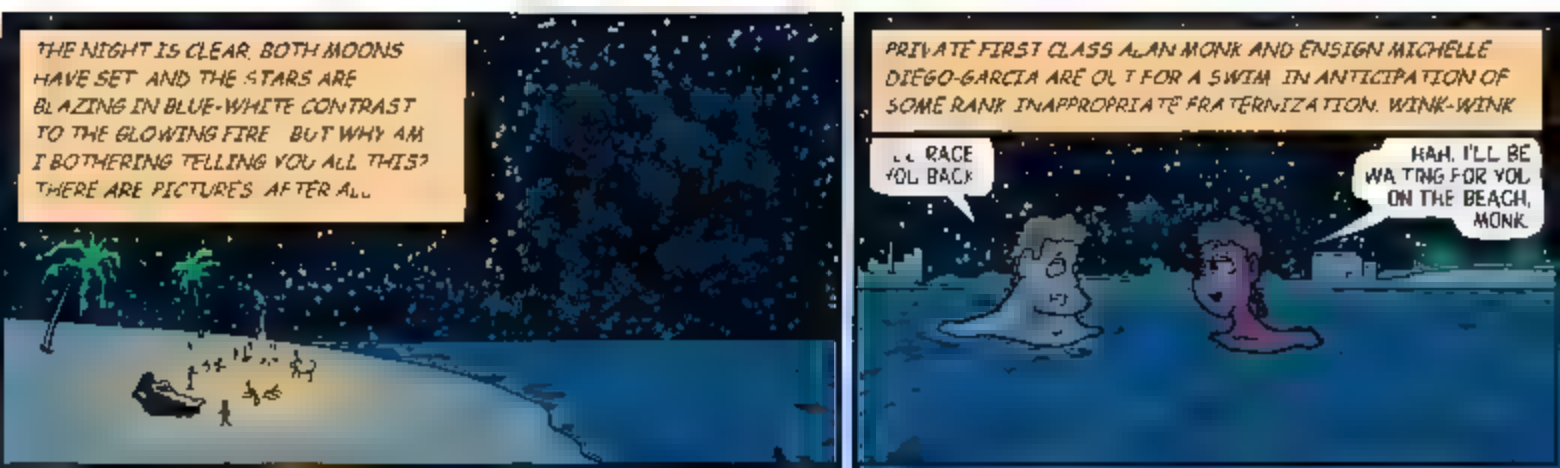

ABOARD THE INTEGRITY IN THE FORWARD BLADE
CAREFUL THERE'S ALMOST A METER OF WATER ON THIS DECK
IT'S NOT JUST WATER, SIR THERE'S SOME KIND OF SILT, AND PLANTS, AND I THINK I SAW A FISH
IT'S LIKE THIRD ORLEANS DOWN HERE
ALL THAT'S MISSIN' IS TH' ZOMBIES

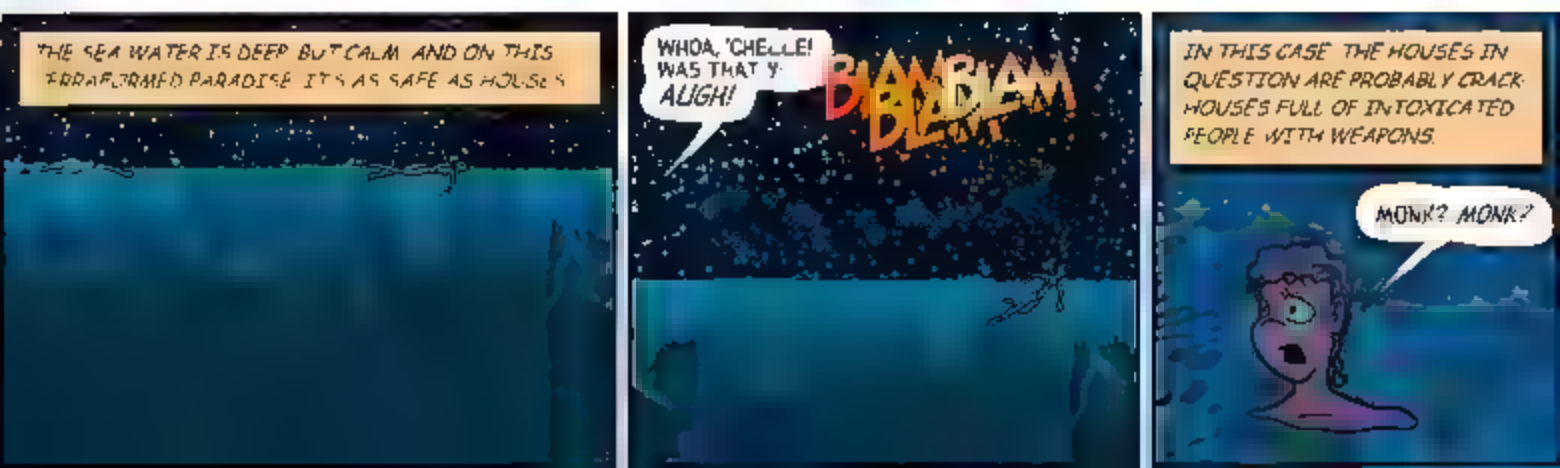

CAPTAIN! ELF! YOU FOUND US!
DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MUCH WATER YOUR LITTLE EXPEDITION TURNED LOOSE ON MY NEW SHIP?
I UMM.
LOTS?
I'M TEMPTED TO TAKE A PAGE FROM SEA FARING PIRATES OF OLD.
YOU WANT US TO WALK THE PLANK?
I WANT YOU TO SWAB THE DECK

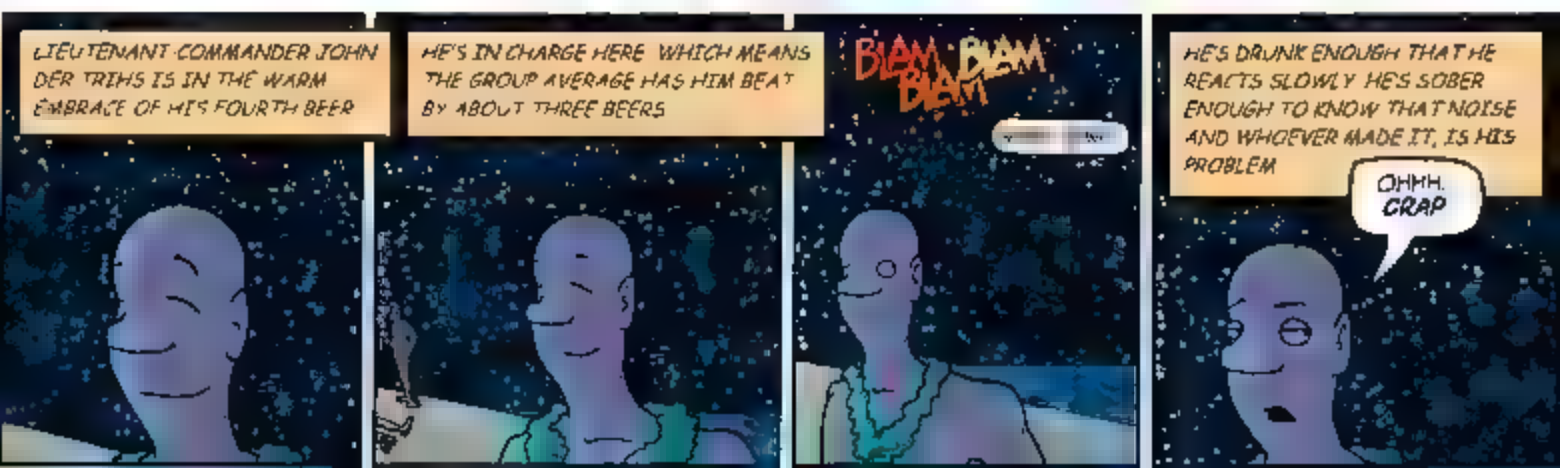
SIR. ARE WE GONNA KEEP THE NAME *INTEGRITY*?
NO. WE NEED TO MAKE HER OUR OWN.
OH, GOOD
DID YOU HAVE A NAME IN MIND, NICK?
YEAH. I THOUGHT WE'D NAME HER AFTER YOU, SIR.
THE *MUDDY BOTTOM*.
I KNOW A DRINKING EXPRESSION I'D LIKE TO INTRODUCE TO YOU

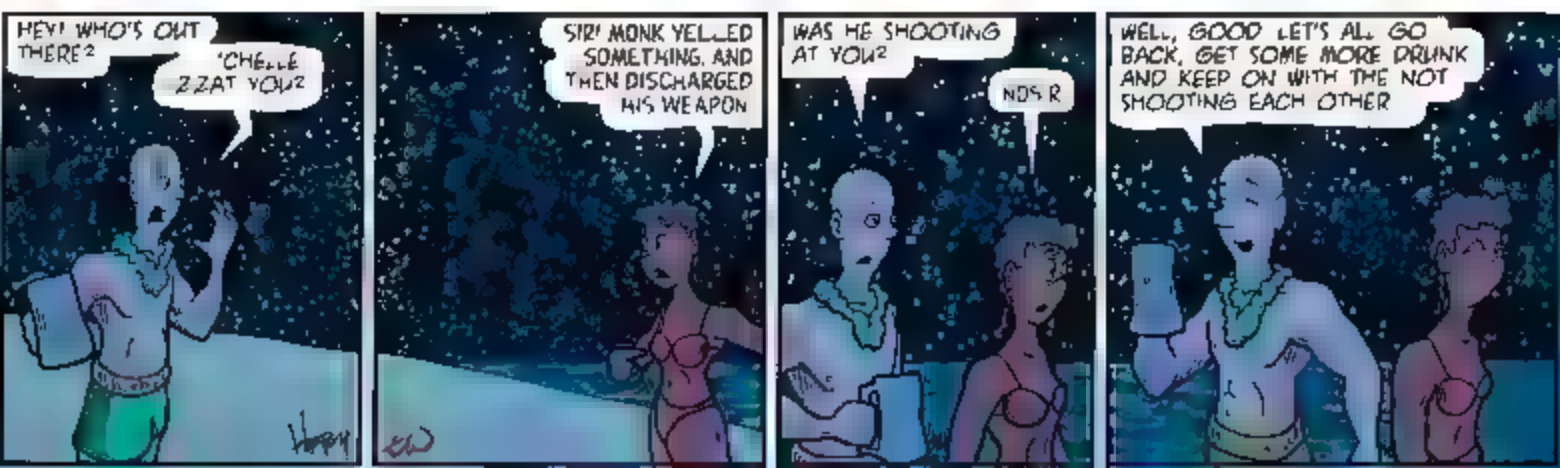

Captain, renaming a ship is not something to be undertaken lightly. It can be terribly bad luck.
You must not even *utter* the new name until all traces of the old name have been stricken from the ship.
Then there are complex ceremonies to appease the gods, to ask a boon from the Universe, and to set at minds at ease concerning the new name of the vessel
CAN YOUR TEAM DO ALL THIS?
In 316 languages, and for 2,238 different cultures, yes.
THESE CEREMONIES DON'T INVOLVE MUD, DO THEY?
The former owners of the ship *were* amphibians. There might be *some* mud involved

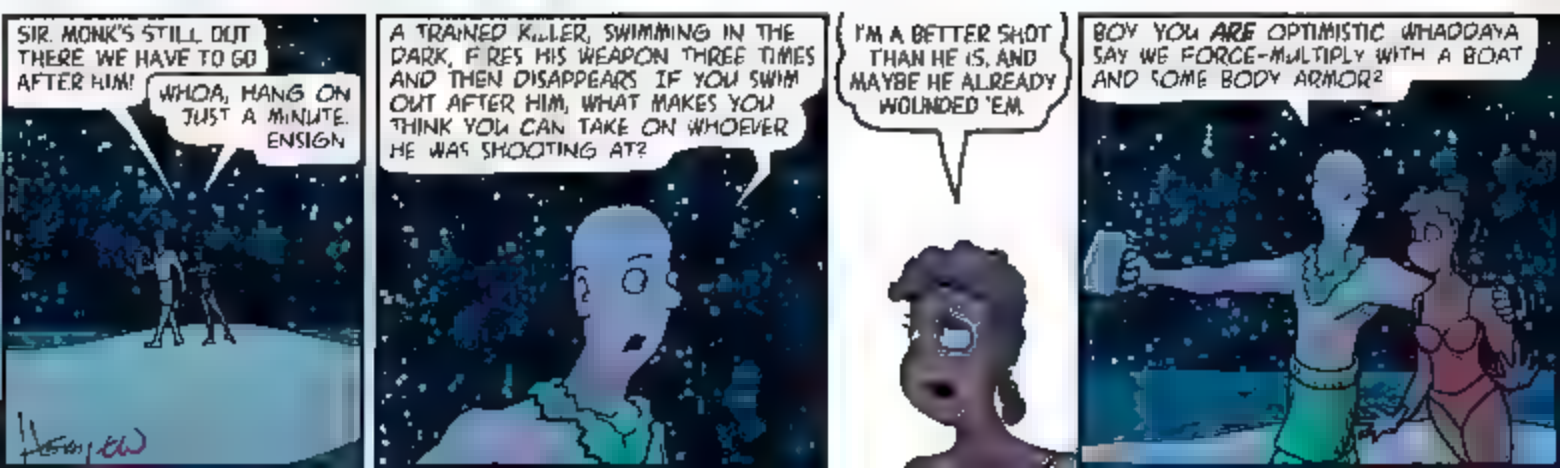

NIGHTTIME ON ONE OF MAHUITALOTUS MANY BEACHES COMES COMPLETE WITH CAMPFIRE CAMARADERIE AND CONTROLLED SUBSTANCES
THESE VACATIONING MERCENARIES HAVENT A CARE IN THIS OR ANY OTHER WORLD, INCLUDING THE ONE OVER WHICH THEIR ABSENT CAPTAIN IS SEEING TO THE REPAIR AND REFITTING OF WHAT WILL EVENTUALLY BE THEIR NEW RIDE
Schlock Mercenary


THE NIGHT IS CLEAR. BOTH MOONS HAVE SET AND THE STARS ARE BLAZING IN BLUE-WHITE CONTRAST TO THE GLOWING FIRE. BUT WHY AM I BOTHERING TELLING YOU ALL THIS? THERE ARE PICTURES. AFTER ALL.
PRIVATE FIRST CLASS ALAN MONK AND ENSIGN MICHELLE DIEGO-GARCIA ARE OUT FOR A SWIM. IN ANTICIPATION OF SOME RANK INAPPROPRIATE FRATERNIZATION. WINK-WINK
I'LL RACE YOU BACK
HAH. I'LL BE WAITING FOR YOU ON THE BEACH, MONK.

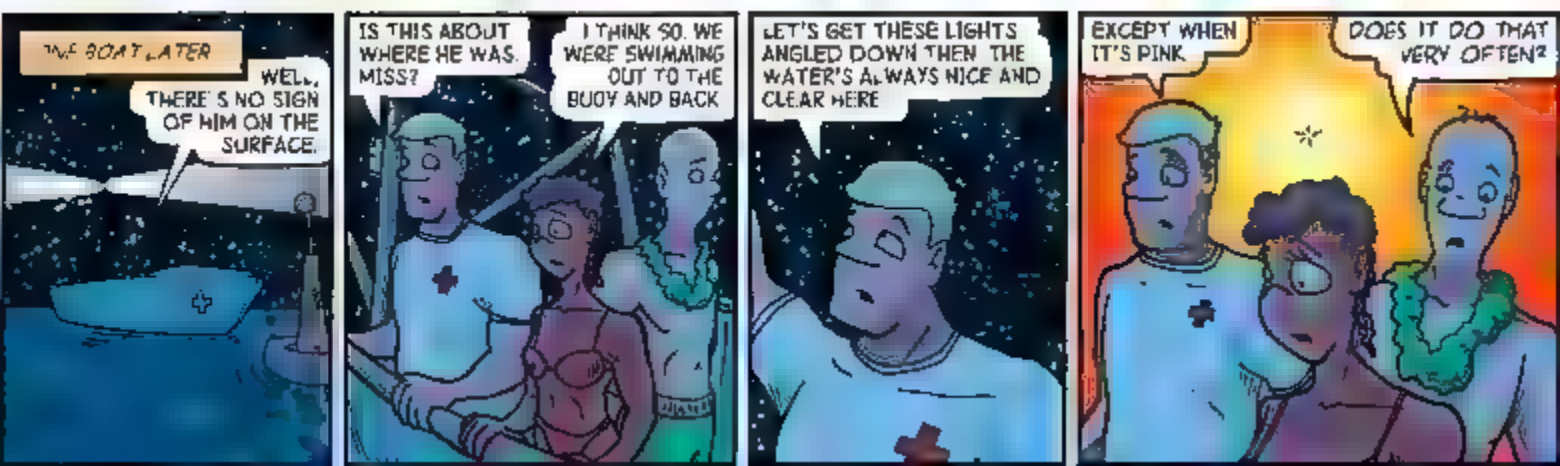

THE SEA WATER IS DEEP BUT CALM AND ON THIS TERRAFORMED PARADISE IT'S AS SAFE AS HOUSES
WHOA, 'CHELLE! WAS THAT Y-
AUGH!
BLAM BLAM BLAM
IN THIS CASE THE HOUSES IN QUESTION ARE PROBABLY CRACK HOUSES FULL OF INTOXICATED PEOPLE WITH WEAPONS.
MONK? MONK?


LIEUTENANT COMMANDER JOHN DER TRIHS IS IN THE WARM EMBRACE OF HIS FOURTH BEER
HE'S IN CHARGE HERE WHICH MEANS THE GROUP AVERAGE HAS HIM BEAT BY ABOUT THREE BEERS
BLAM BLAM BLAM
HE'S DRUNK ENOUGH THAT HE REACTS SLOWLY HE'S SOBER ENOUGH TO KNOW THAT NOISE AND WHOEVER MADE IT, IS HIS PROBLEM
OHHH. CRAP


HEY! WHO'S OUT THERE?
'CHELLE ZZAT YOU?
SIR! MONK YELLED SOMETHING, AND THEN DISCHARGED HIS WEAPON
WAS HE SHOOTING AT YOU?
NOSIR
WELL, GOOD LET'S ALL GO BACK, GET SOME MORE DRUNK AND KEEP ON WITH THE NOT SHOOTING EACH OTHER

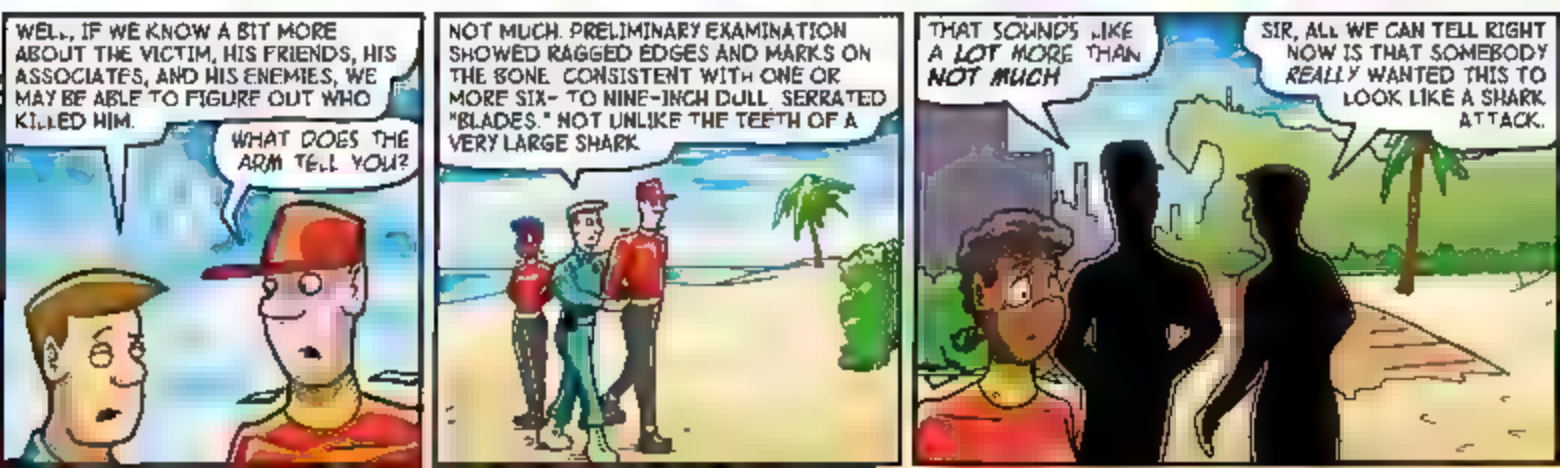

SIR, MONK'S STILL OUT THERE WE HAVE TO GO AFTER HIM!
WHOA, HANG ON JUST A MINUTE, ENSIGN
A TRAINED KILLER, SWIMMING IN THE DARK, FIRES HIS WEAPON THREE TIMES AND THEN DISAPPEARS IF YOU SWIM OUT AFTER HIM, WHAT MAKES YOU THINK YOU CAN TAKE ON WHOEVER HE WAS SHOOTING AT?
I'M A BETTER SHOT THAN HE IS, AND MAYBE HE ALREADY WOUNDED 'EM.
BOY YOU ARE OPTIMISTIC WHADDAYA SAY WE FORCE-MULTIPLY WITH A BOAT AND SOME BODY ARMOR?

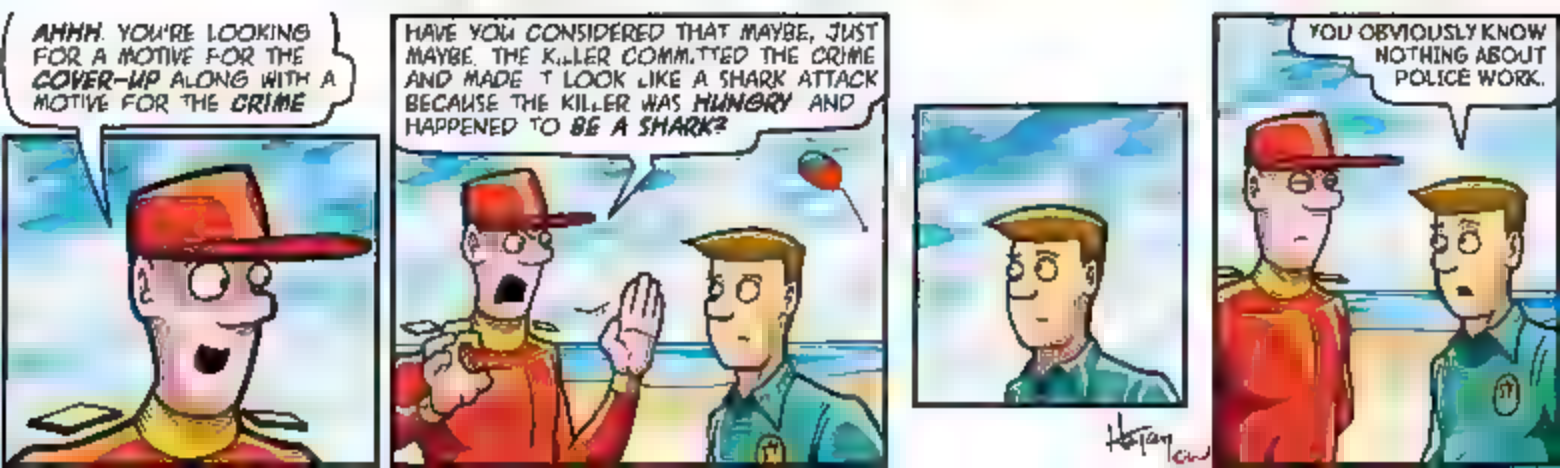
I HEARD SHOOTING. WHAT'S GOING ON OUT HERE?
WE'VE LOST A MAN IN THE WATER
DO YOU HAVE A BOAT?
WHAT WERE YOU SHOOTING AT?
I WASN'T HE WAS.
A BOAT PLEASE?
THE SWIMMER WAS CARRYING A FIREARM?
I THINK ALL OF US ARE FORCE OF HABIT
B-O-A-T, BOAT!
WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE ARE YOU?
PEOPLE WHO NEED A BOAT, RIGHT NOW!
OOOH LOOK, THERE'S ONE

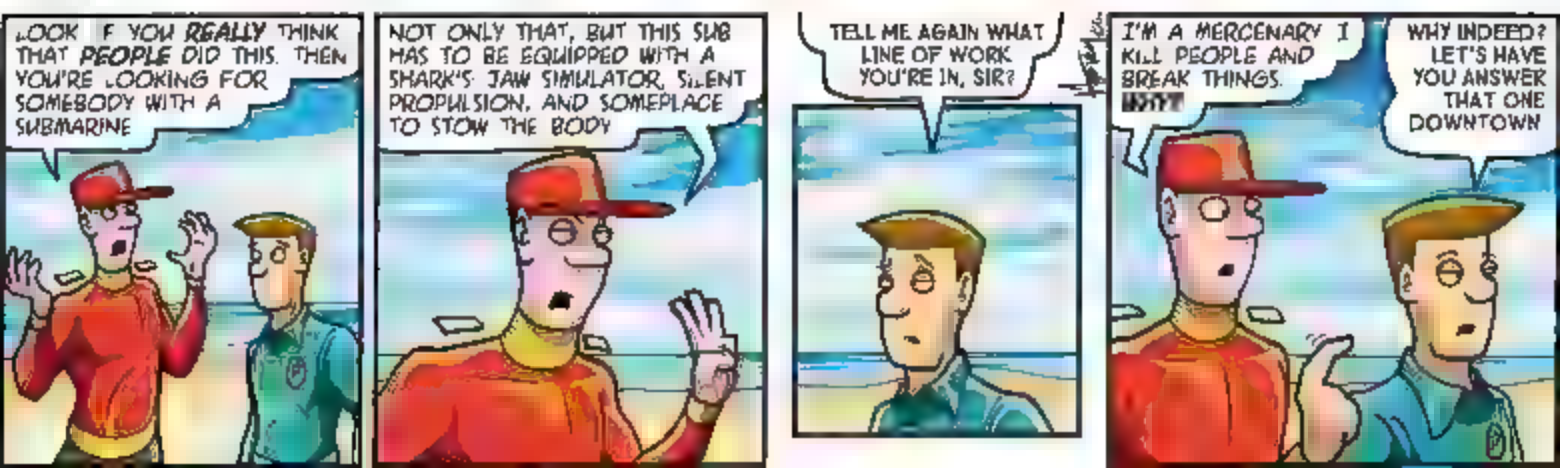

THE BOAT LATER
WELL, THERE'S NO SIGN OF HIM ON THE SURFACE.
IS THIS ABOUT WHERE HE WAS, MISS?
I THINK SO. WE WERE SWIMMING OUT TO THE BUOY AND BACK.
LET'S GET THESE LIGHTS ANGLED DOWN THEN. THE WATER'S ALWAYS NICE AND CLEAR HERE.
EXCEPT WHEN IT'S PINK.
DOES IT DO THAT VERY OFTEN?

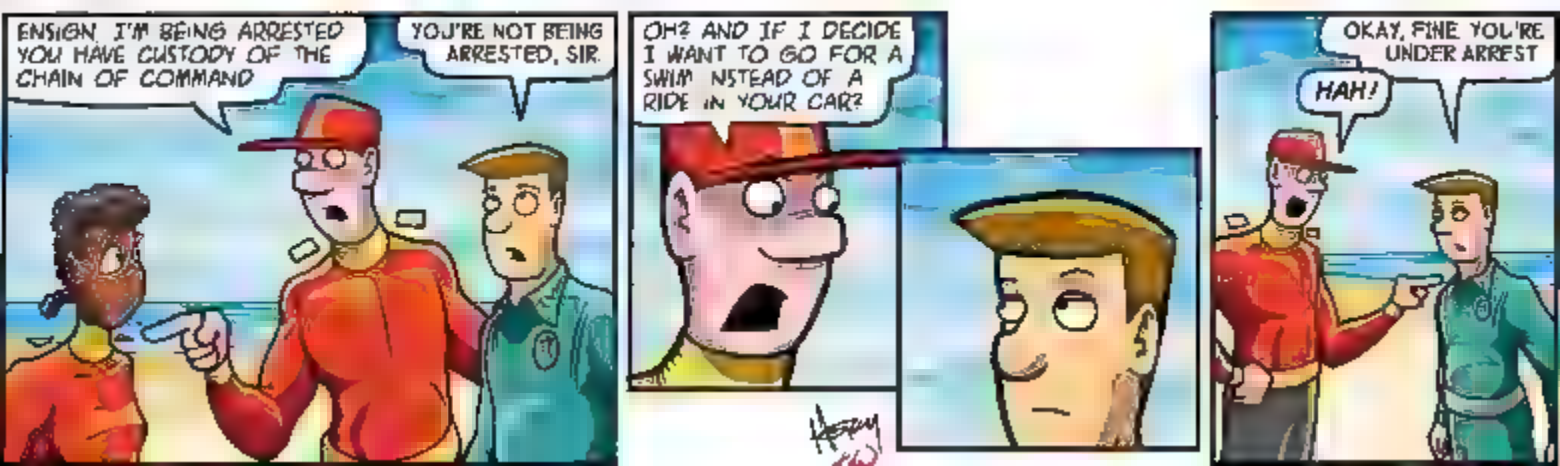
SEARCH AND RESCUE IS ON THEIR WAY OUT THERE I M AFRAID THIS MAY JUST BE A RECOVERY OPERATION THOUGH
THE POLICE WILL BE HERE SHORTLY OBVIOUSLY THEY'LL SUSPECT FOUL PLAY
WHAT, NOT FISH PLAY?
HARDLY. ON THIS TERRAFORMED PARADISE THERE IS ONLY ONE PREDATOR LARGE ENOUGH TO HAVE DONE THIS.
AND IT'S WHAT VACATIONING ON THE OTHER HEMISPHERE RIGHT NOW?
HE S TALKING ABOUT PEOPLE SIR

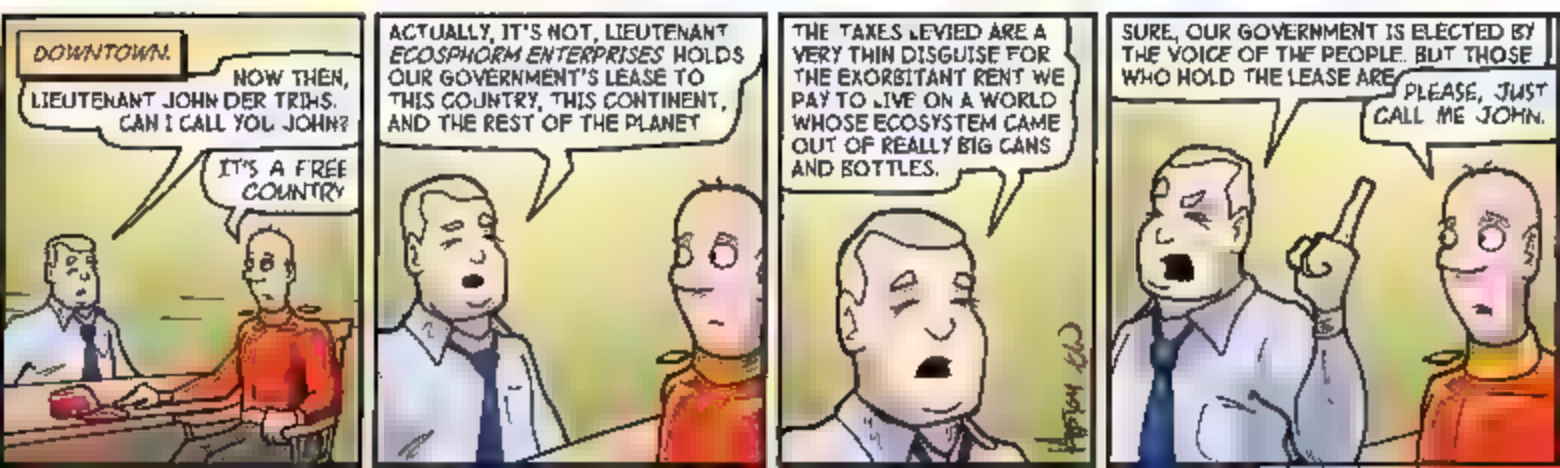
SEARCH AND RESCUE HAS BECOME SEARCH AND RECOVERY
I'M SORRY, FOLKS. WE FOUND YOUR FRIEND'S RIGHT ARM, LYING ON THE BOTTOM.
WE ALSO FOUND YOUR FRIEND'S PISTOL, AND RECOVERED ONE OF THE ROUNDS HE FIRED
WOULD YOU LIKE TO TELL ME WHAT HE WAS DOING WITH HIGH-VELOCITY ARMOR-PIERCING AMMUNITION?
THAT'S A SILLY QUESTION. WE USE IT FOR KILLING PEOPLE WHO ARE WEARING BODY ARMOR. WHY DO YOU ASK?
Schlock Mercenary

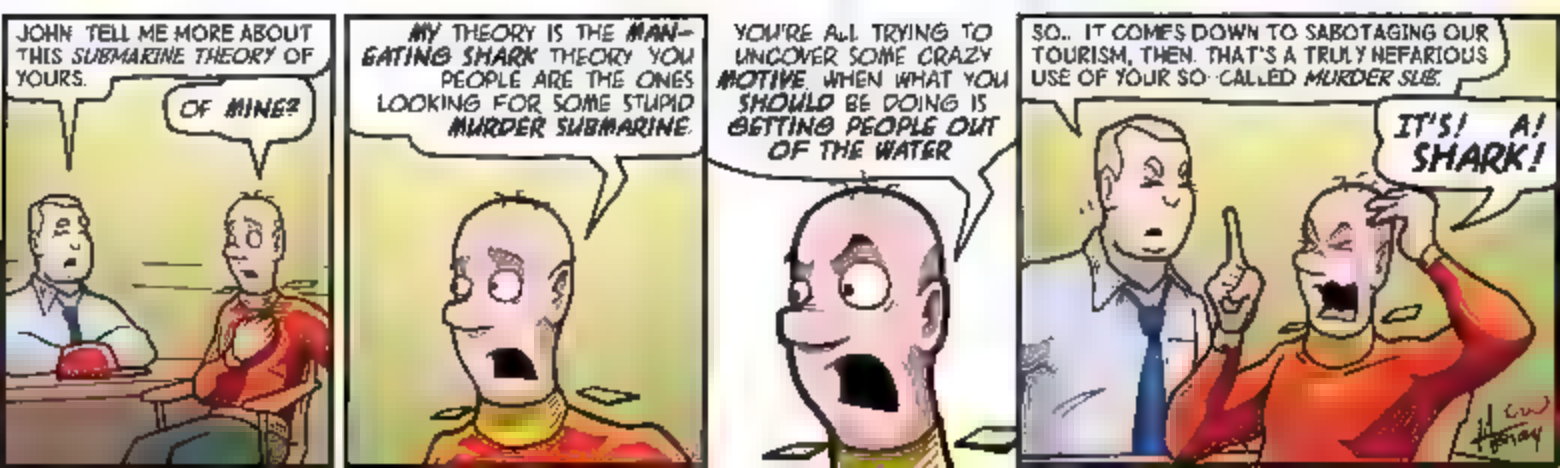

WELL, IF WE KNOW A BIT MORE ABOUT THE VICTIM, HIS FRIENDS, HIS ASSOCIATES, AND HIS ENEMIES, WE MAY BE ABLE TO FIGURE OUT WHO KILLED HIM.
WHAT DOES THE ARM TELL YOU?
NOT MUCH. PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION SHOWED RAGGED EDGES AND MARKS ON THE BONE. CONSISTENT WITH ONE OR MORE SIX- TO NINE-INCH DULL, SERRATED "BLADES." NOT UNLIKE THE TEETH OF A VERY LARGE SHARK.
THAT SOUNDS LIKE A *LOT MORE* THAN *NOT MUCH*
SIR, ALL WE CAN TELL RIGHT NOW IS THAT SOMEBODY *REALLY* WANTED THIS TO LOOK LIKE A SHARK ATTACK.

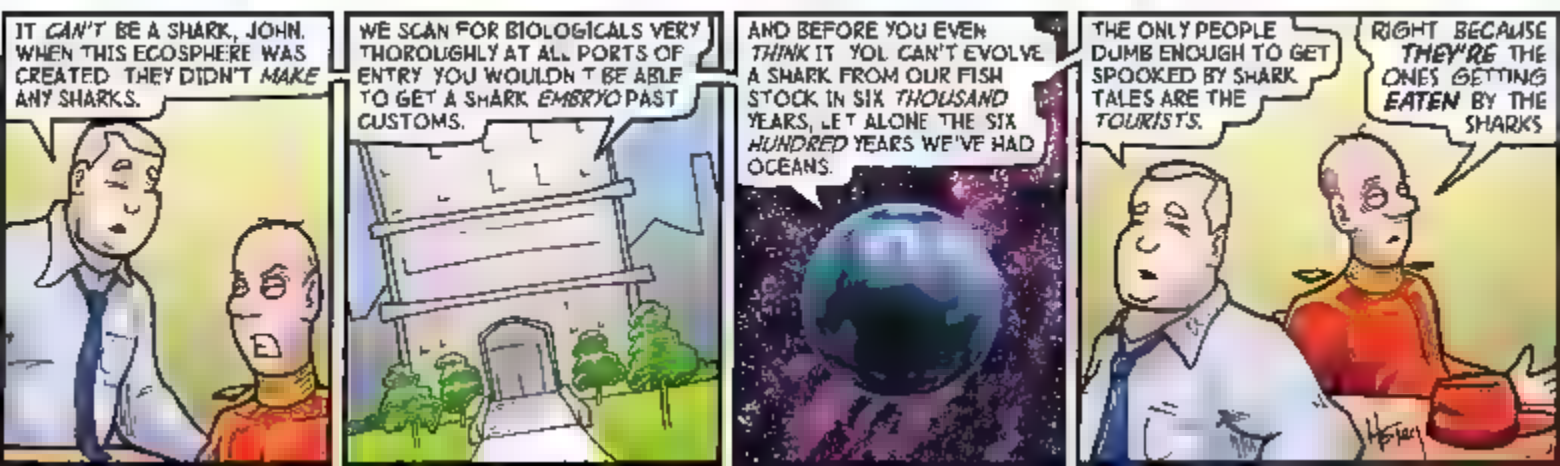

AHHH. YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A MOTIVE FOR THE COVER-UP ALONG WITH A MOTIVE FOR THE CRIME
HAVE YOU CONSIDERED THAT MAYBE, JUST MAYBE, THE KILLER COMMITTED THE CRIME AND MADE IT LOOK LIKE A SHARK ATTACK BECAUSE THE KILLER WAS HUNGRY AND HAPPENED TO BE A SHARK?
YOU OBVIOUSLY KNOW NOTHING ABOUT POLICE WORK.

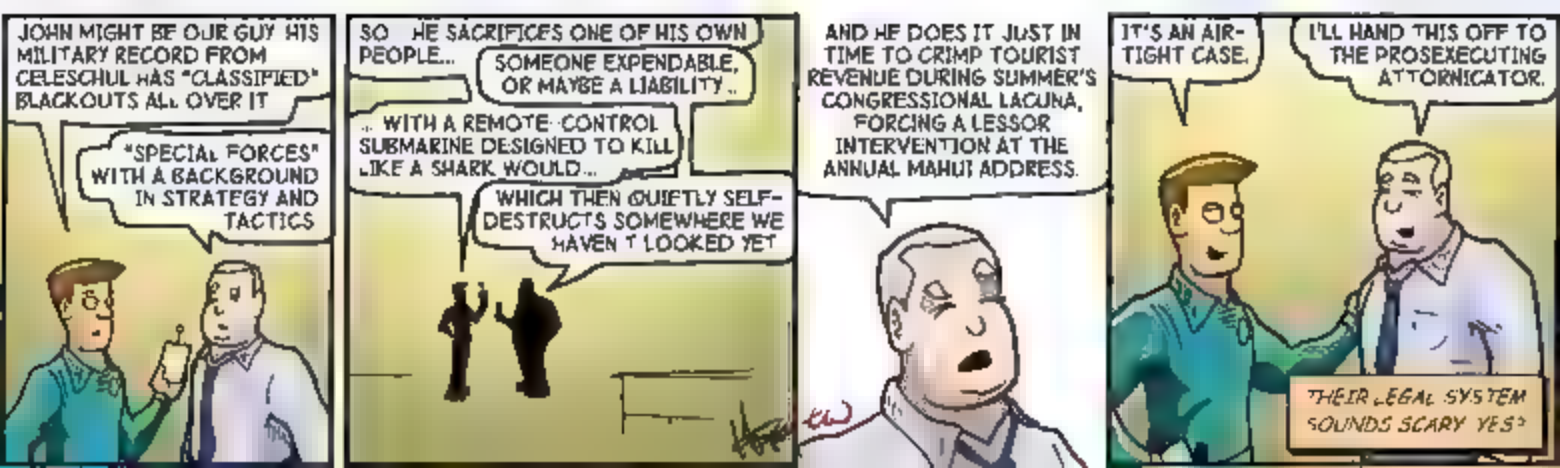

LOOK IF YOU REALLY THINK THAT PEOPLE DID THIS, THEN YOU'RE LOOKING FOR SOMEBODY WITH A SUBMARINE
NOT ONLY THAT, BUT THIS SUB HAS TO BE EQUIPPED WITH A SHARK'S JAW SIMULATOR, SILENT PROPULSION, AND SOMEPLACE TO STOW THE BODY
TELL ME AGAIN WHAT LINE OF WORK YOU'RE IN, SIR?
I'M A MERCENARY I KILL PEOPLE AND BREAK THINGS.
WHY INDEED? LET'S HAVE YOU ANSWER THAT ONE DOWNTOWN

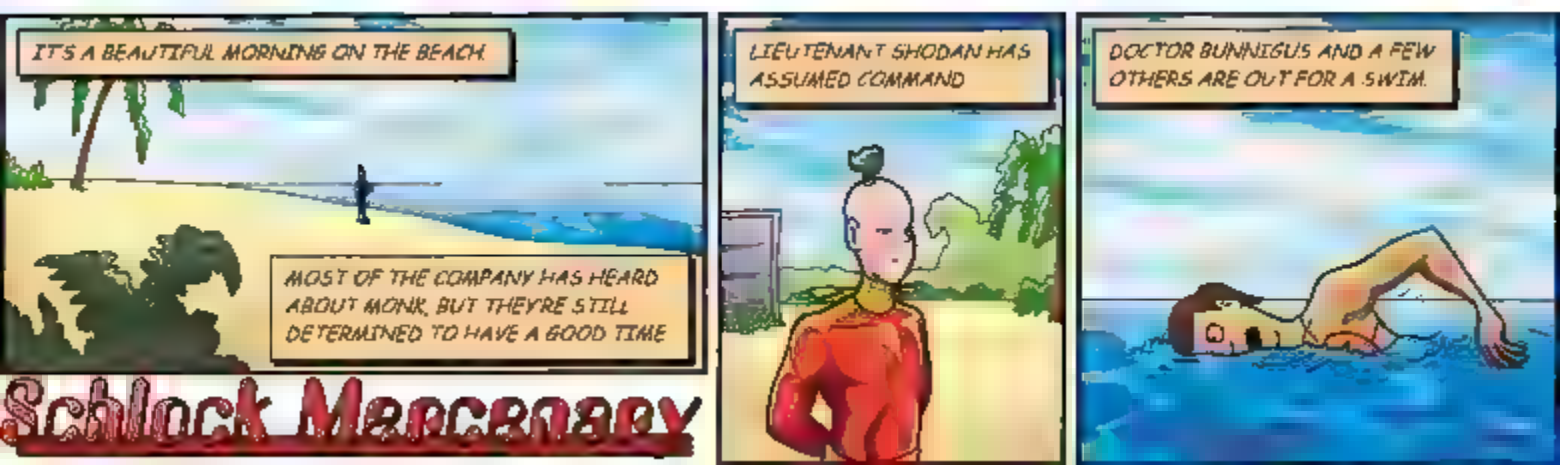

ENSIGN, I'M BEING ARRESTED YOU HAVE CUSTODY OF THE CHAIN OF COMMAND
YOU'RE NOT BEING ARRESTED, SIR.
OH? AND IF I DECIDE I WANT TO GO FOR A SWIM INSTEAD OF A RIDE IN YOUR CAR?
OKAY, FINE YOU'RE UNDER ARREST
HAH!

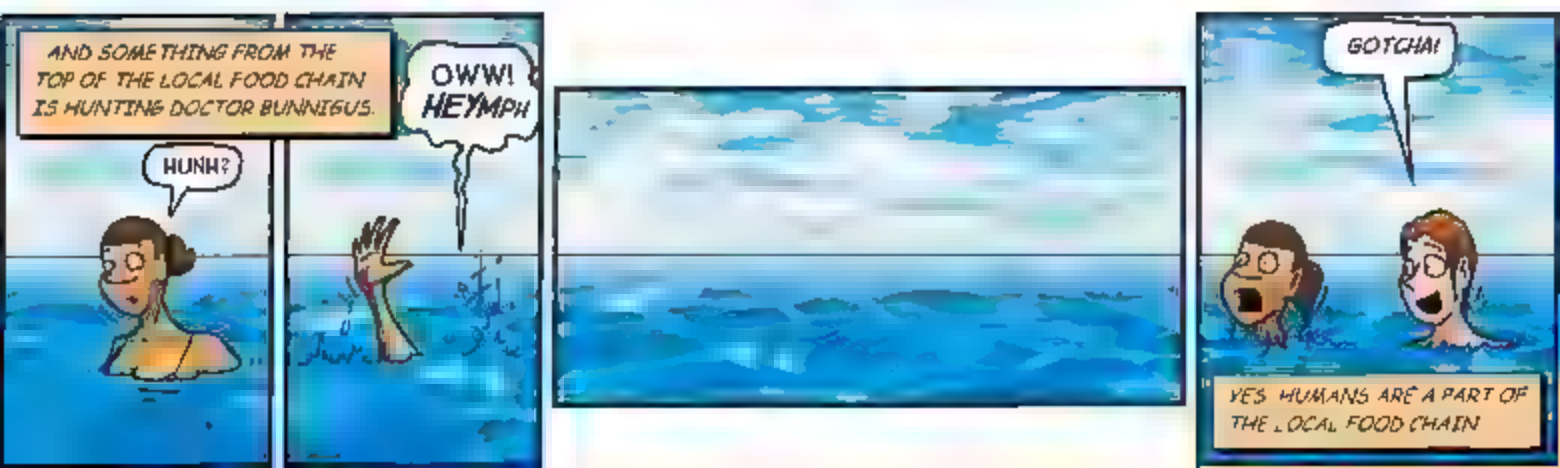

DOWNTOWN.
NOW THEN, LIEUTENANT JOHN DER TRIHS. CAN I CALL YOU JOHN?
IT'S A FREE COUNTRY
ACTUALLY, IT'S NOT, LIEUTENANT *ECOSPHORM ENTERPRISES* HOLDS OUR GOVERNMENT'S LEASE TO THIS COUNTRY, THIS CONTINENT, AND THE REST OF THE PLANET
THE TAXES LEVIED ARE A VERY THIN DISGUISE FOR THE EXORBITANT RENT WE PAY TO LIVE ON A WORLD WHOSE ECOSYSTEM CAME OUT OF REALLY BIG CANS AND BOTTLES.
SURE, OUR GOVERNMENT IS ELECTED BY THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE. BUT THOSE WHO HOLD THE LEASE ARE
PLEASE, JUST CALL ME JOHN.

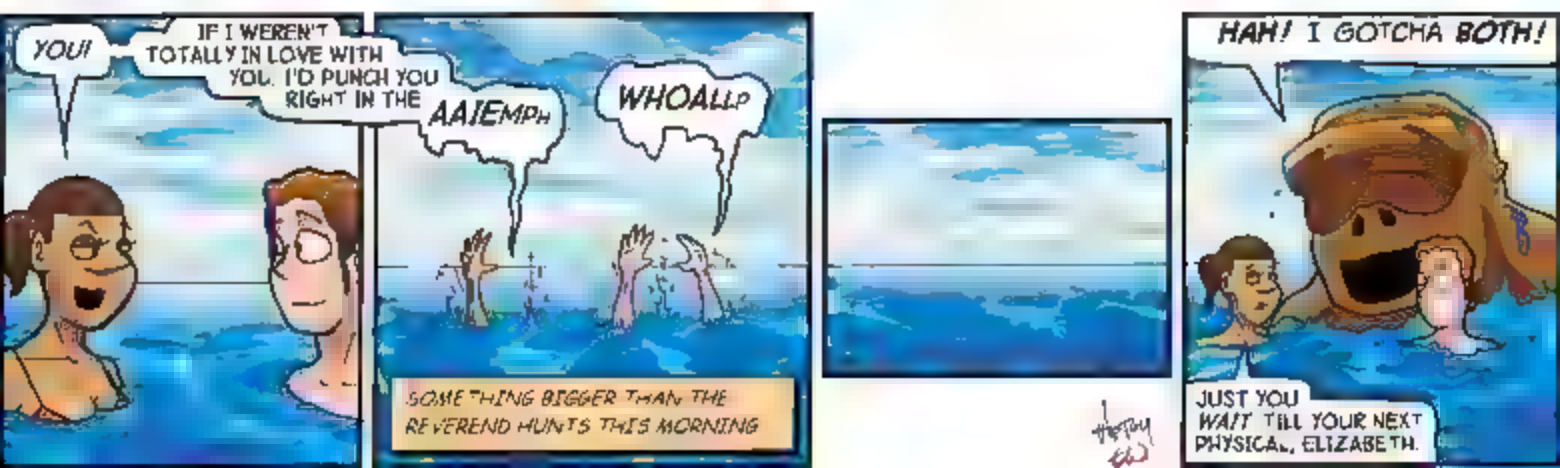

JOHN TELL ME MORE ABOUT THIS SUBMARINE THEORY OF YOURS.
OF MINE?
MY THEORY IS THE MAN-EATING SHARK THEORY YOU PEOPLE ARE THE ONES LOOKING FOR SOME STUPID MURDER SUBMARINE.
YOU'RE ALL TRYING TO UNCOVER SOME CRAZY MOTIVE WHEN WHAT YOU SHOULD BE DOING IS GETTING PEOPLE OUT OF THE WATER
SO... IT COMES DOWN TO SABOTAGING OUR TOURISM, THEN. THAT'S A TRULY NEFARIOUS USE OF YOUR SO-CALLED MURDER SUB.
IT'S! A! SHARK!

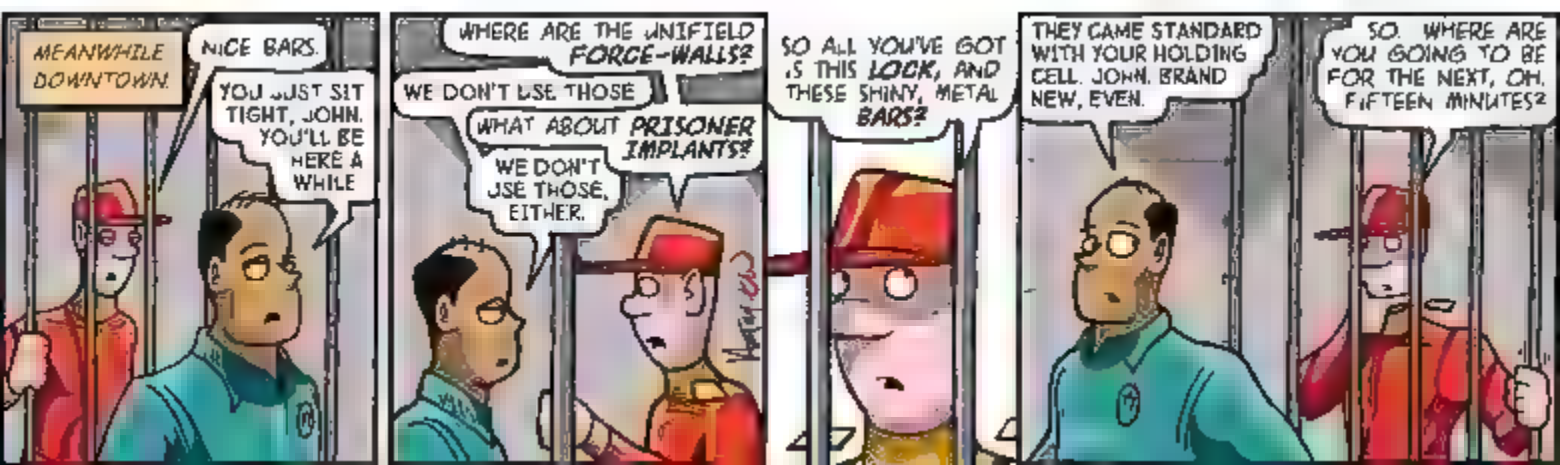

IT *CAN'T* BE A SHARK, JOHN. WHEN THIS ECOSPHERE WAS CREATED THEY DIDN'T *MAKE* ANY SHARKS.
WE SCAN FOR BIOLOGICALS VERY THOROUGHLY AT ALL PORTS OF ENTRY YOU WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO GET A SHARK *EMBRYO* PAST CUSTOMS.
AND BEFORE YOU EVEN *THINK* IT YOU CAN'T EVOLVE A SHARK FROM OUR FISH STOCK IN SIX *THOUSAND* YEARS, LET ALONE THE SIX *HUNDRED* YEARS WE'VE HAD OCEANS.
THE ONLY PEOPLE DUMB ENOUGH TO GET SPOOKED BY SHARK TALES ARE THE *TOURISTS*.
RIGHT BECAUSE ***THEY'RE*** THE ONES GETTING ***EATEN*** BY THE SHARKS

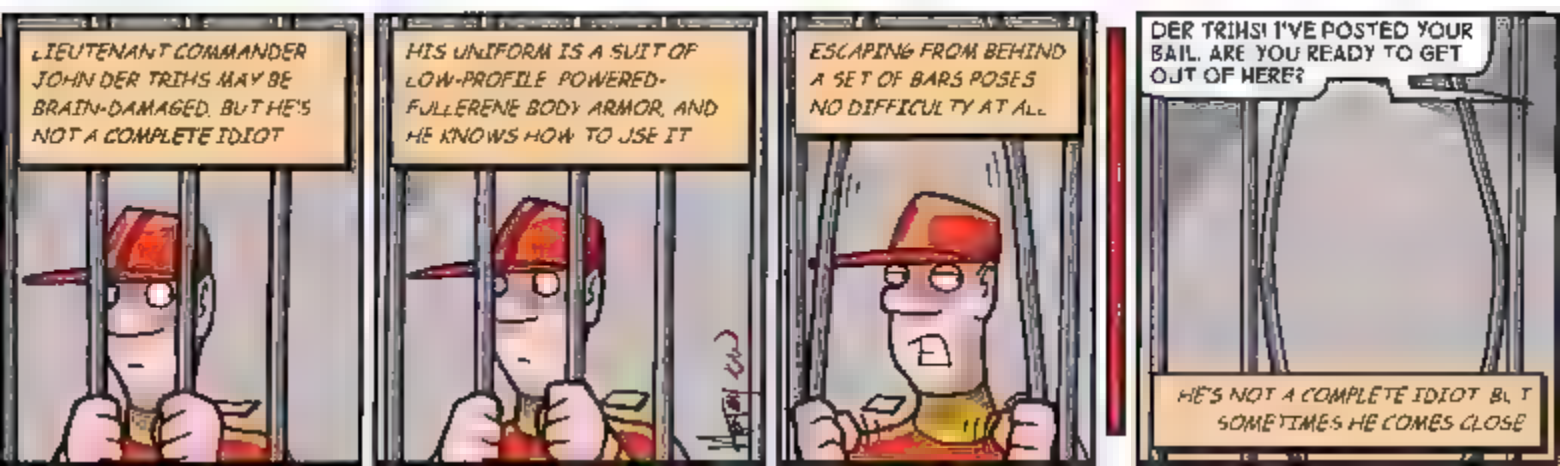

JOHN MIGHT BE OUR GUY HIS MILITARY RECORD FROM CELESCHUL HAS "CLASSIFIED" BLACKOUTS ALL OVER IT
"SPECIAL FORCES" WITH A BACKGROUND IN STRATEGY AND TACTICS
SO... HE SACRIFICES ONE OF HIS OWN PEOPLE...
SOMEONE EXPENDABLE, OR MAYBE A LIABILITY..
... WITH A REMOTE-CONTROL SUBMARINE DESIGNED TO KILL LIKE A SHARK WOULD...
WHICH THEN QUIETLY SELF-DESTRUCTS SOMEWHERE WE HAVEN'T LOOKED YET
AND HE DOES IT JUST IN TIME TO CRIMP TOURIST REVENUE DURING SUMMER'S CONGRESSIONAL LACUNA, FORCING A LESSOR INTERVENTION AT THE ANNUAL MAHUI ADDRESS.
IT'S AN AIR-TIGHT CASE.
I'LL HAND THIS OFF TO THE PROSEXECUTING ATTORNICATOR.
THEIR LEGAL SYSTEM SOUNDS SCARY YES?

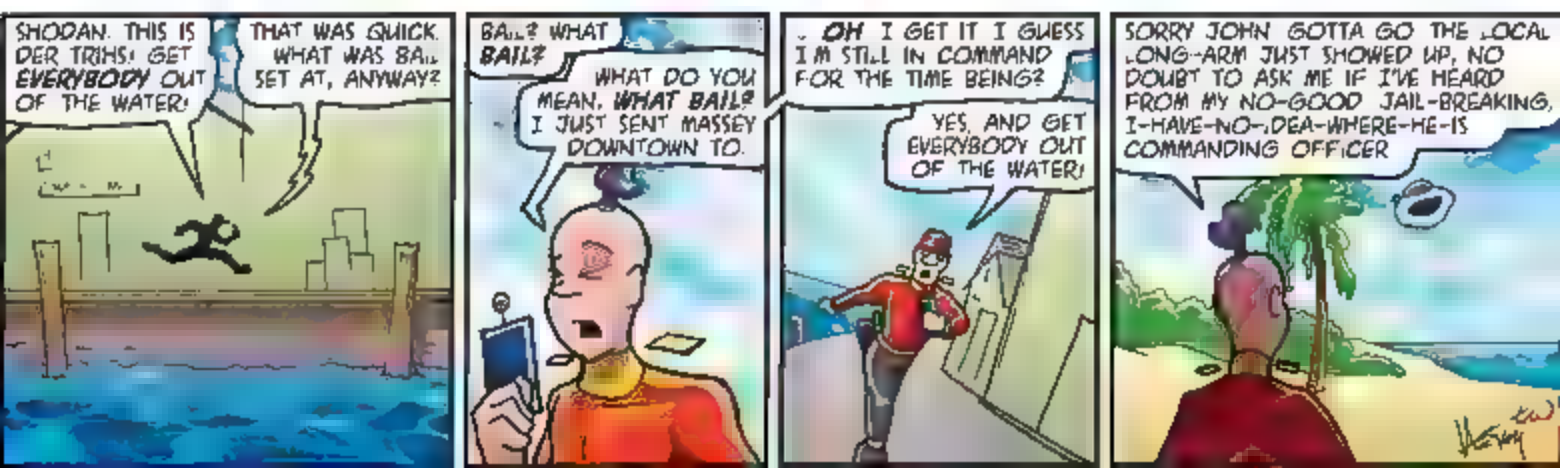

IT'S A BEAUTIFUL MORNING ON THE BEACH.
MOST OF THE COMPANY HAS HEARD ABOUT MONK, BUT THEY'RE STILL DETERMINED TO HAVE A GOOD TIME
Schlock Mercenary
LIEUTENANT SHODAN HAS ASSUMED COMMAND
DOCTOR BUNNIGUS AND A FEW OTHERS ARE OUT FOR A SWIM.

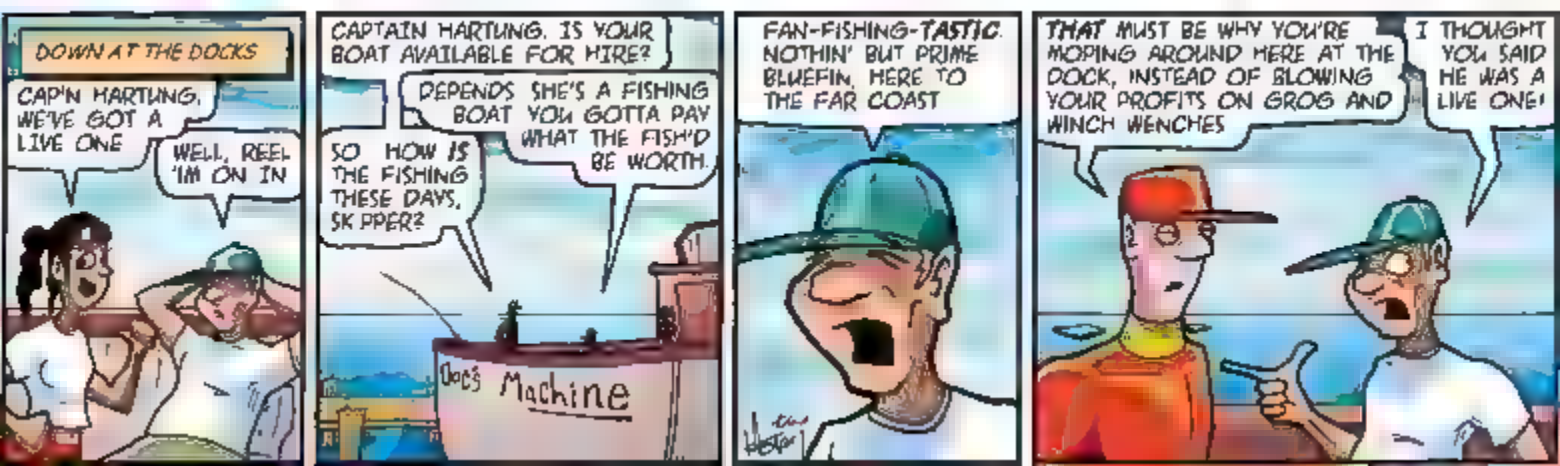

AND SOMETHING FROM THE TOP OF THE LOCAL FOOD CHAIN IS HUNTING DOCTOR BUNNIGUS.
HUNH?
OWW! HEYMPH
GOTCHA!
YES, HUMANS ARE A PART OF THE LOCAL FOOD CHAIN


YOU!
IF I WEREN'T TOTALLY IN LOVE WITH YOU, I'D PUNCH YOU RIGHT IN THE
AAIEMPH
WHOALLP
SOMETHING BIGGER THAN THE REVEREND HUNTS THIS MORNING
HAH! I GOTCHA BOTH!
JUST YOU WAIT TILL YOUR NEXT PHYSICAL, ELIZABETH.

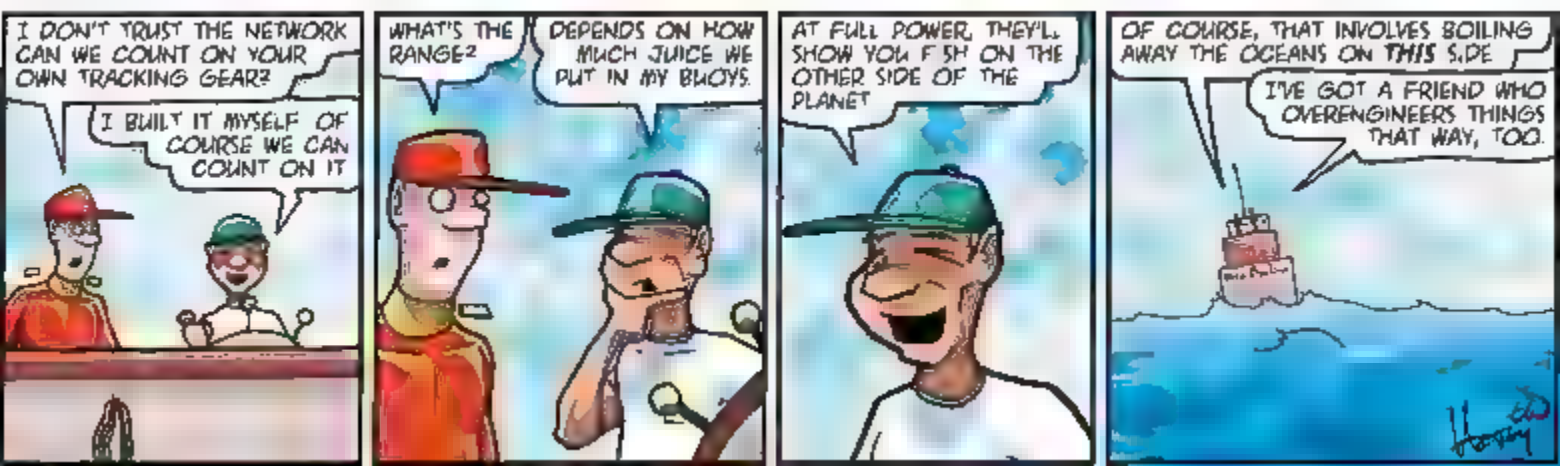

MEANWHILE DOWNTOWN.
NICE BARS.
YOU JUST SIT TIGHT, JOHN. YOU'LL BE HERE A WHILE
WHERE ARE THE UNIFIELD FORCE-WALLS?
WE DON'T USE THOSE
WHAT ABOUT PRISONER IMPLANTS?
WE DON'T USE THOSE, EITHER.
SO ALL YOU'VE GOT IS THIS LOCK, AND THESE SHINY, METAL BARS?
THEY CAME STANDARD WITH YOUR HOLDING CELL. JOHN. BRAND NEW, EVEN.
SO. WHERE ARE YOU GOING TO BE FOR THE NEXT, OH. FIFTEEN MINUTES?

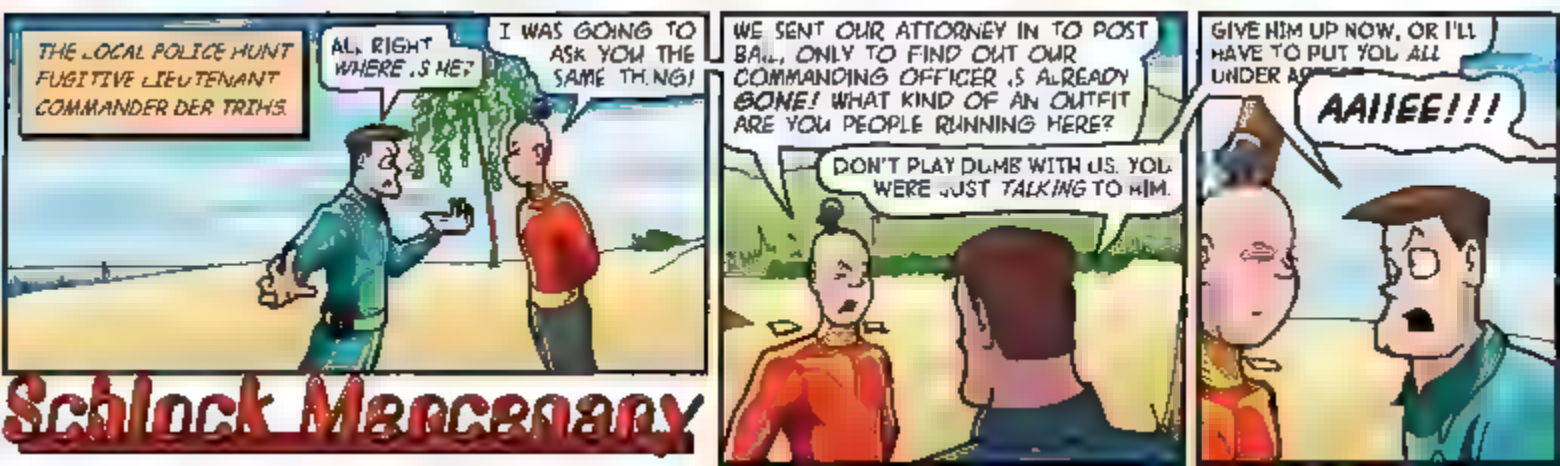

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER JOHN DER TRIHS MAY BE BRAIN-DAMAGED, BUT HE'S NOT A COMPLETE IDIOT
HIS UNIFORM IS A SUIT OF LOW-PROFILE POWERED-FULLERENE BODY ARMOR, AND HE KNOWS HOW TO USE IT
ESCAPING FROM BEHIND A SET OF BARS POSES NO DIFFICULTY AT ALL
DER TRIHS! I'VE POSTED YOUR BAIL. ARE YOU READY TO GET OUT OF HERE?
HE'S NOT A COMPLETE IDIOT BUT SOMETIMES HE COMES CLOSE

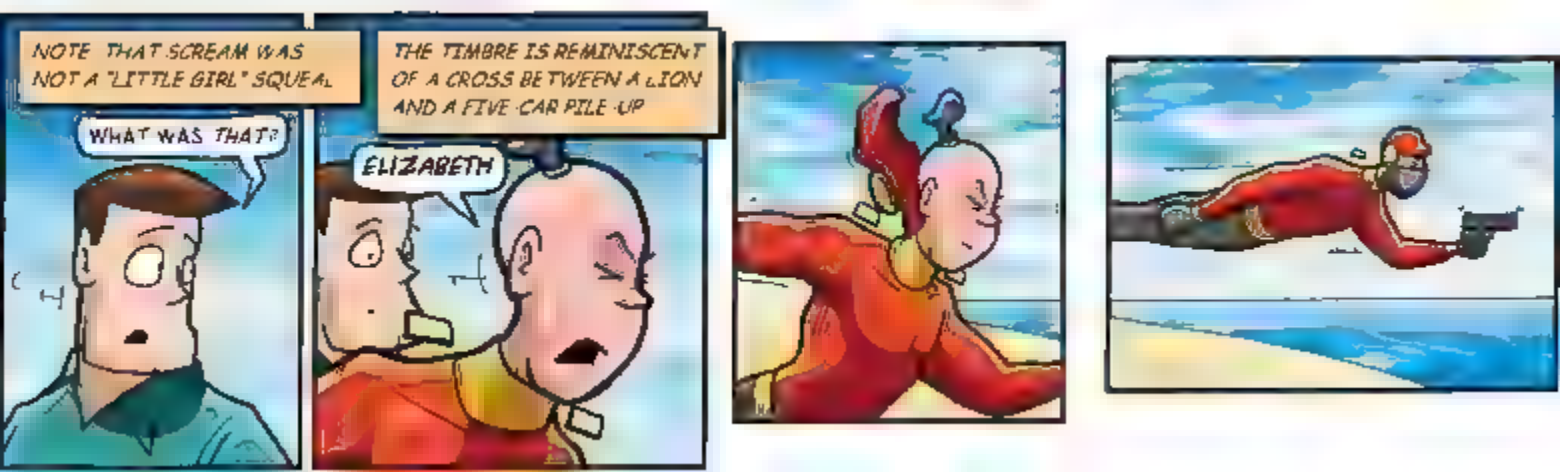

SHODAN. THIS IS DER TRIHS! GET EVERYBODY OUT OF THE WATER!
THAT WAS QUICK. WHAT WAS BAIL SET AT, ANYWAY?
BAIL? WHAT BAIL?
WHAT DO YOU MEAN, WHAT BAIL? I JUST SENT MASSEY DOWNTOWN TO.
OH I GET IT I GUESS I'M STILL IN COMMAND FOR THE TIME BEING?
YES, AND GET EVERYBODY OUT OF THE WATER!
SORRY JOHN GOTTA GO THE LOCAL LONG-ARM JUST SHOWED UP, NO DOUBT TO ASK ME IF I'VE HEARD FROM MY NO-GOOD JAIL-BREAKING, I-HAVE-NO-IDEA-WHERE-HE-IS COMMANDING OFFICER

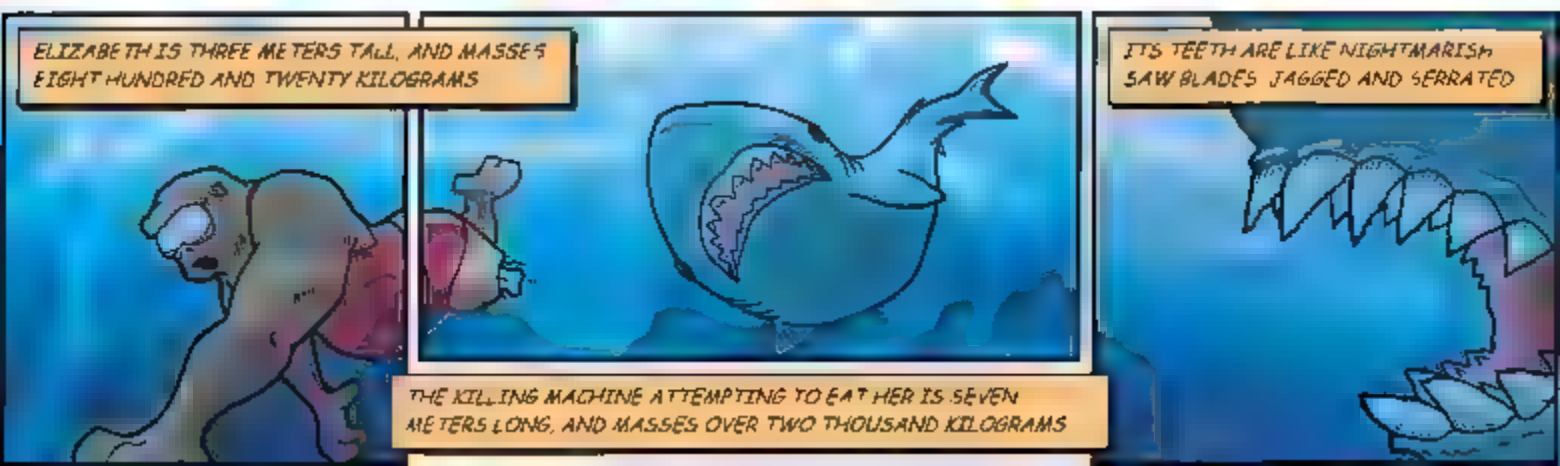

DOWN AT THE DOCKS
CAP'N HARTUNG, WE'VE GOT A LIVE ONE
WELL, REEL 'IM ON IN
CAPTAIN HARTUNG, IS YOUR BOAT AVAILABLE FOR HIRE?
DEPENDS SHE'S A FISHING BOAT YOU GOTTA PAY WHAT THE FISH'D BE WORTH.
SO HOW IS THE FISHING THESE DAYS, SKIPPER?
Doc's Machine
FAN-FISHING-TASTIC. NOTHIN' BUT PRIME BLUEFIN, HERE TO THE FAR COAST
THAT MUST BE WHY YOU'RE MOPING AROUND HERE AT THE DOCK, INSTEAD OF BLOWING YOUR PROFITS ON GROG AND WINCH WENCHES
I THOUGHT YOU SAID HE WAS A LIVE ONE!

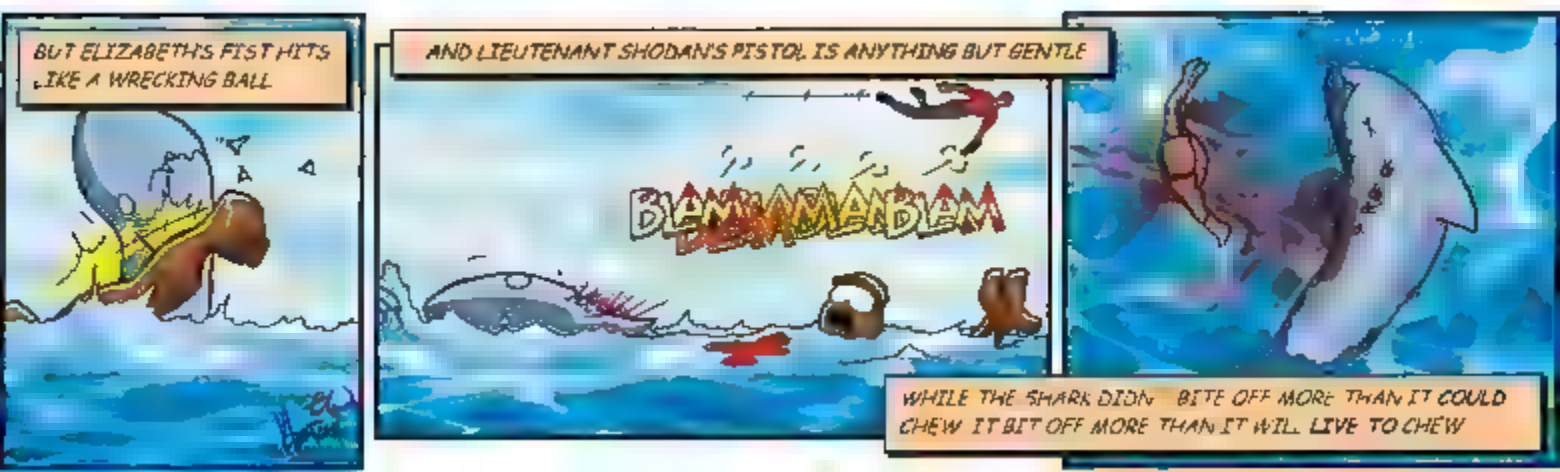
I'VE GOT TRACKIN' GEAR, BUT THE NETWORK OF BUOY-EYES TRACK THE FISH BETTER. WE GET MAPS, TREND-LINES. THE WORKS
SEE HERE MOSTLY THEY SUMMER NOR'BOUND, WITH TH' EASTERN TALOTIC CURRENT AN' WINTER BACK DOWN THROUGH TH' TONGASSUS ISLES, WHERE TH' ORIGINAL NURSERIES WERE.
INTERESTING THAT'S. OHHH, MY HEAD
UNGH.. I THINK I DISLOCATED MY BRAIN.
THAT HAPPENED TO ME ONCE WITH SOME O' THAT ALGAE-BRA. I'LL GETCHA A NICE GROG 'N COFFEE

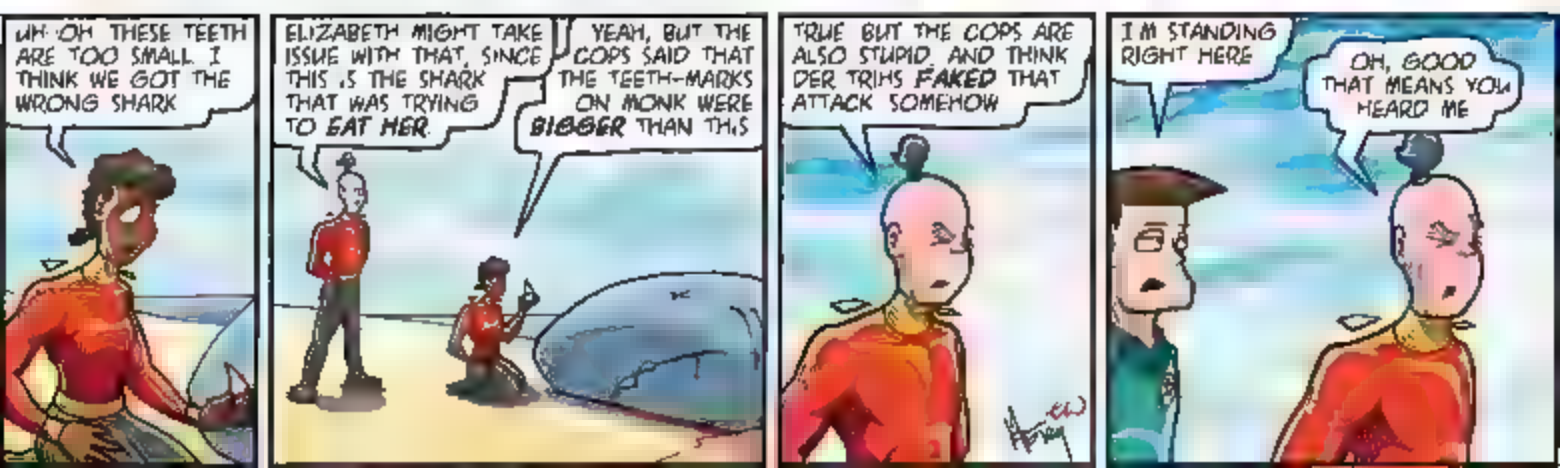

I DON'T TRUST THE NETWORK CAN WE COUNT ON YOUR OWN TRACKING GEAR?
I BUILT IT MYSELF OF COURSE WE CAN COUNT ON IT
WHAT'S THE RANGE?
DEPENDS ON HOW MUCH JUICE WE PUT IN MY BUOYS.
AT FULL POWER, THEY'LL SHOW YOU F SH ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE PLANET
OF COURSE, THAT INVOLVES BOILING AWAY THE OCEANS ON THIS SIDE
I'VE GOT A FRIEND WHO OVERENGINEERS THINGS THAT WAY, TOO.

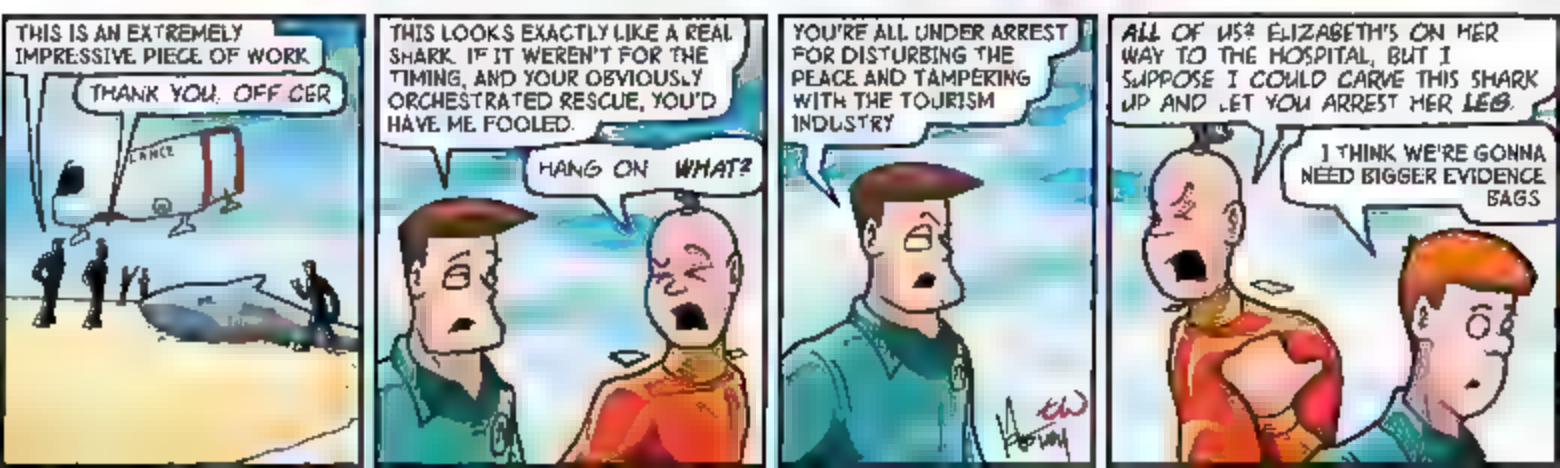

THE LOCAL POLICE HUNT FUGITIVE LIEUTENANT COMMANDER DER TRIHS.
ALL RIGHT WHERE IS HE?
I WAS GOING TO ASK YOU THE SAME THING!
WE SENT OUR ATTORNEY IN TO POST BAIL, ONLY TO FIND OUT OUR COMMANDING OFFICER IS ALREADY BONE! WHAT KIND OF AN OUTFIT ARE YOU PEOPLE RUNNING HERE?
DON'T PLAY DUMB WITH US. YOU WERE JUST TALKING TO HIM.
GIVE HIM UP NOW, OR I'LL HAVE TO PUT YOU ALL UNDER AR
AAIIEE!!!
Schlock Mercenary


NOTE THAT SCREAM WAS NOT A "LITTLE GIRL" SQUEAL
WHAT WAS THAT?
THE TIMBRE IS REMINISCENT OF A CROSS BETWEEN A LION AND A FIVE-CAR PILE-UP
ELIZABETH

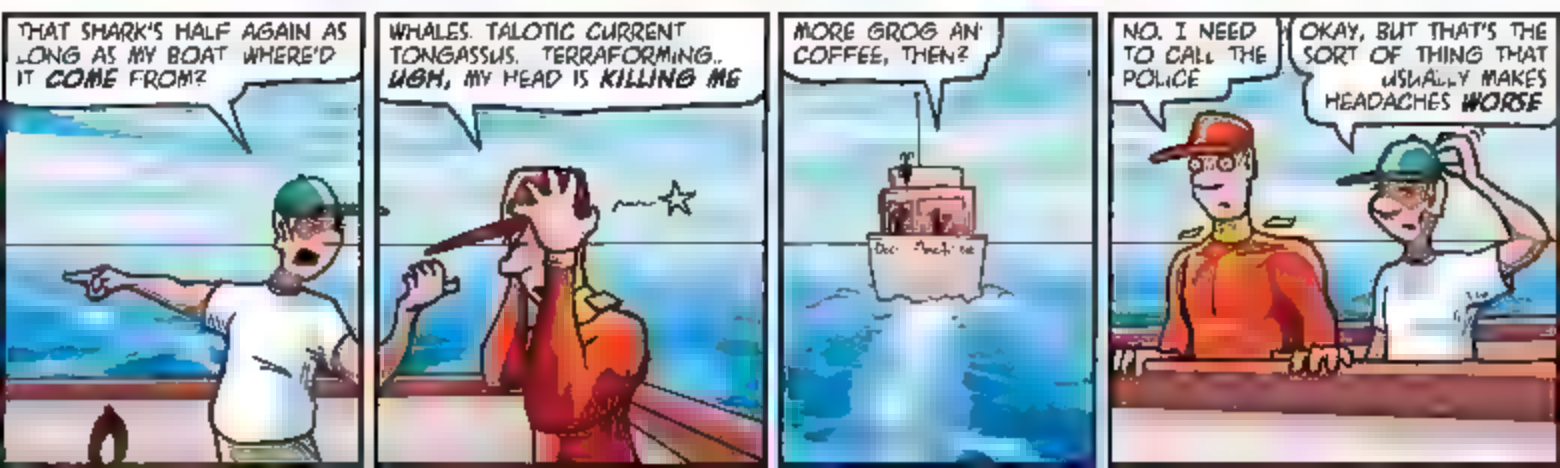

ELIZABETH IS THREE METERS TALL, AND MASSES EIGHT HUNDRED AND TWENTY KILOGRAMS
THE KILLING MACHINE ATTEMPTING TO EAT HER IS SEVEN METERS LONG, AND MASSES OVER TWO THOUSAND KILOGRAMS
ITS TEETH ARE LIKE NIGHTMARISH SAW BLADES JAGGED AND SERRATED


BUT ELIZABETH'S FIST HITS LIKE A WRECKING BALL
AND LIEUTENANT SHODAN'S PISTOL IS ANYTHING BUT GENTLE
BLAM BLAM BLAM
WHILE THE SHARK DIDN'T BITE OFF MORE THAN IT COULD CHEW IT BIT OFF MORE THAN IT WILL LIVE TO CHEW

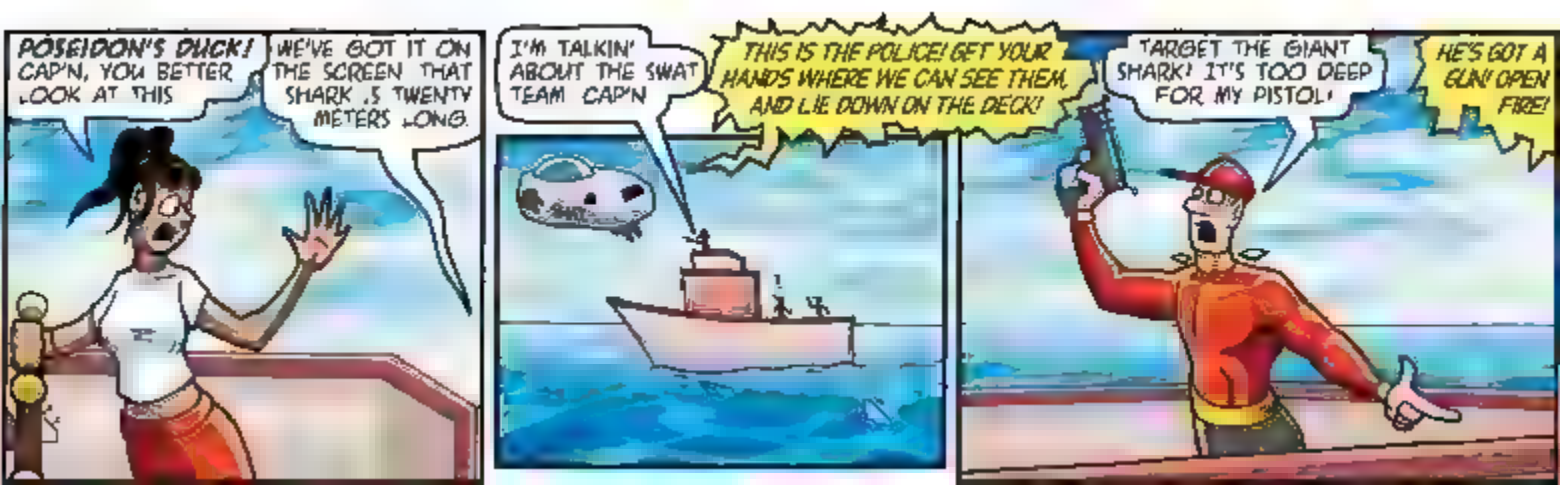

UH-OH THESE TEETH ARE TOO SMALL. I THINK WE GOT THE WRONG SHARK
ELIZABETH MIGHT TAKE ISSUE WITH THAT, SINCE THIS IS THE SHARK THAT WAS TRYING TO EAT HER.
YEAH, BUT THE COPS SAID THAT THE TEETH-MARKS ON MONK WERE BIGGER THAN THIS
TRUE BUT THE COPS ARE ALSO STUPID AND THINK DER TRIHS FAKED THAT ATTACK SOMEHOW
I'M STANDING RIGHT HERE
OH, GOOD THAT MEANS YOU HEARD ME

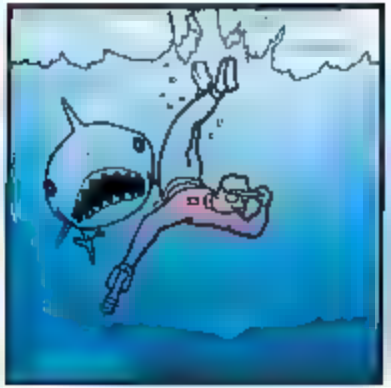

THIS IS AN EXTREMELY IMPRESSIVE PIECE OF WORK.
THANK YOU, OFFICER
THIS LOOKS EXACTLY LIKE A REAL SHARK. IF IT WEREN'T FOR THE TIMING, AND YOUR OBVIOUSLY ORCHESTRATED RESCUE, YOU'D HAVE ME FOOLED.
HANG ON. WHAT?
YOU'RE ALL UNDER ARREST FOR DISTURBING THE PEACE AND TAMPERING WITH THE TOURISM INDUSTRY.
ALL OF US? ELIZABETH'S ON HER WAY TO THE HOSPITAL, BUT I SUPPOSE I COULD CARVE THIS SHARK UP AND LET YOU ARREST HER LEG.
I THINK WE'RE GONNA NEED BIGGER EVIDENCE BAGS.

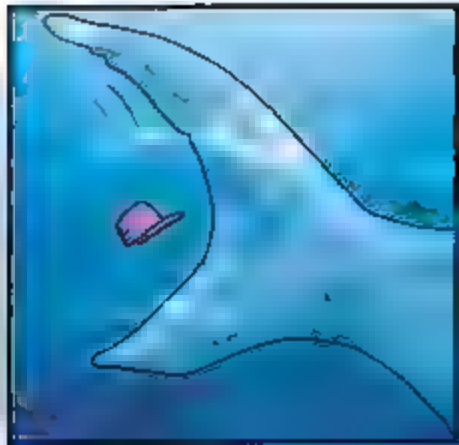
THE NETWORK SHOWS A POD O' WHALES A FEW KLICKS TO STARBOARD
PERFECT NOW FIRE UP YOUR BUOYS AND LOOK AT 'EM.
SAME THING NO, WAIT MY SYSTEM SHOWS THAT THERE'S A STRAGGLER
THAT STRAGGLER IS NO WHALE
SO, CAPTAIN HARTUNG HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO CATCH A GIANT SHARK?
I THINK WE'RE GONNA NEED A BIGGER BOAT
e's Machine


THAT SHARK'S HALF AGAIN AS LONG AS MY BOAT WHERE'D IT COME FROM?
WHALES. TALOTIC CURRENT TONGASSUS. TERRAFORMING.. UGH, MY HEAD IS KILLING ME
MORE GROG AN' COFFEE, THEN?
NO. I NEED TO CALL THE POLICE
OKAY, BUT THAT'S THE SORT OF THING THAT USUALLY MAKES HEADACHES WORSE

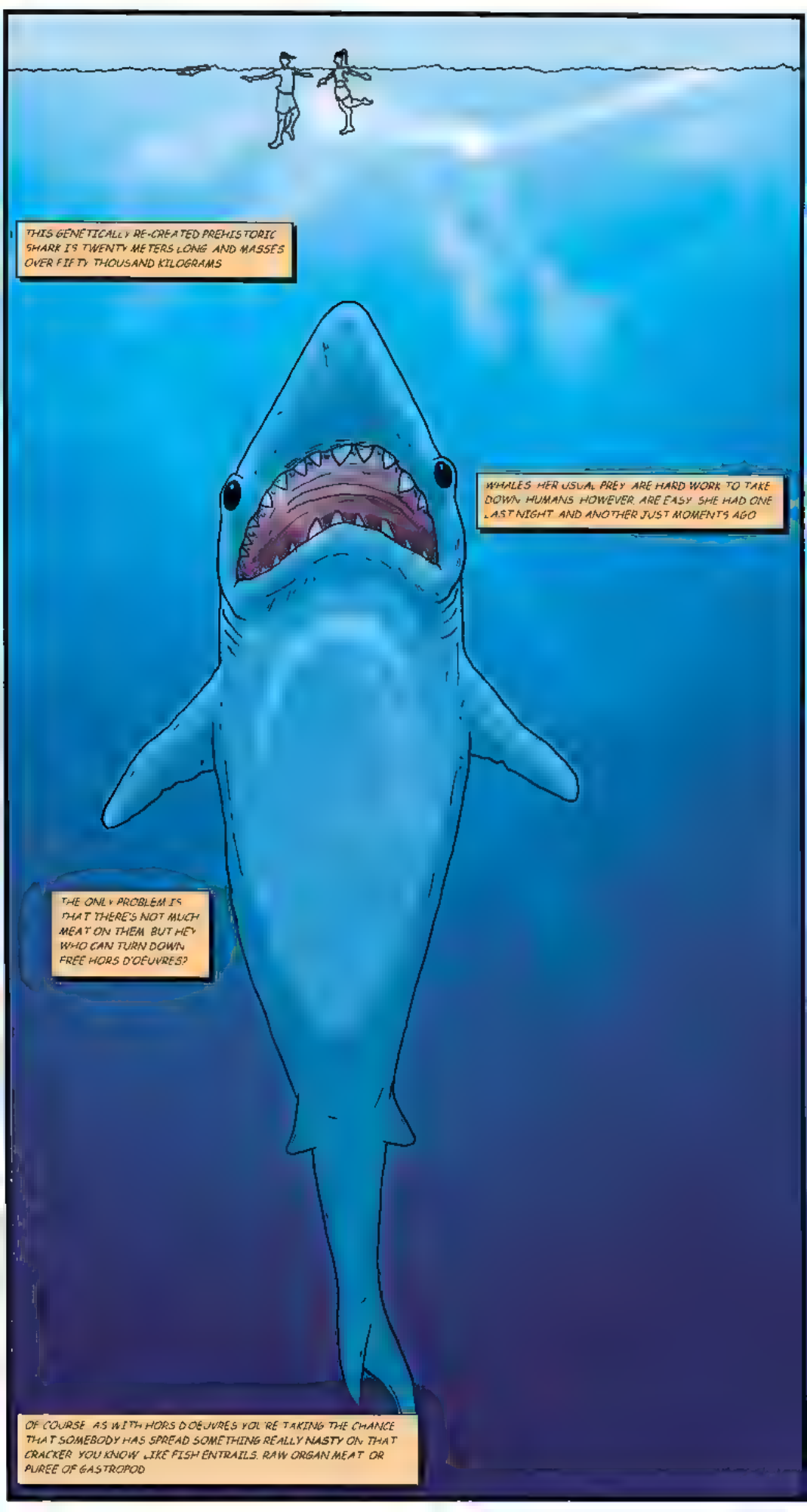
HI, DETECTIVE DANNOVO? JOHN DER TRIHS HERE. YOU KNOW, THE GUY WHO BROKE OUT OF YOUR JAIL?
I'VE FIGURED IT OUT. SOMEONE IS USING THE OLD TONGASSUS NURSERY GEAR TO MAKE SHARKS FROM DOWNLOADED GENOMES, AND THEY'VE REPROGRAMMED YOUR SENSOR NET TO IGNORE THEM.
WE'VE FOUND A REAL MONSTER OUT HERE. THE GPS ON MY PHONE SHOULD LEAD YOU RIGHT TO US.
RIGHT. SEE YOU SOON!
FOR AS SMART AS YOU ARE, FIGURING ALL THAT OUT, I THINK YOUR PHONE CALL MAY HAVE BEEN KINDA DUMB


POSEIDON'S DUCK!
CAP'N, YOU BETTER LOOK AT THIS
WE'VE GOT IT ON THE SCREEN THAT SHARK IS TWENTY METERS LONG.
I'M TALKIN' ABOUT THE SWAT TEAM CAP'N
THIS IS THE POLICE! GET YOUR HANDS WHERE WE CAN SEE THEM, AND LIE DOWN ON THE DECK!
TARGET THE GIANT SHARK! IT'S TOO DEEP FOR MY PISTOL!
HE'S GOT A GUN! OPEN FIRE!

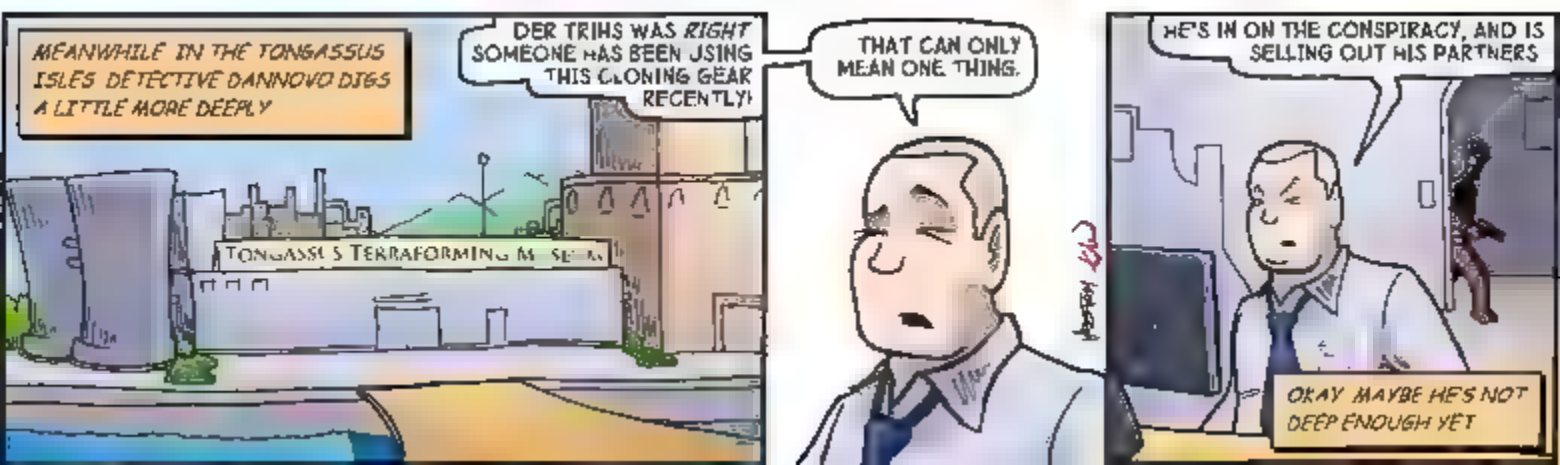


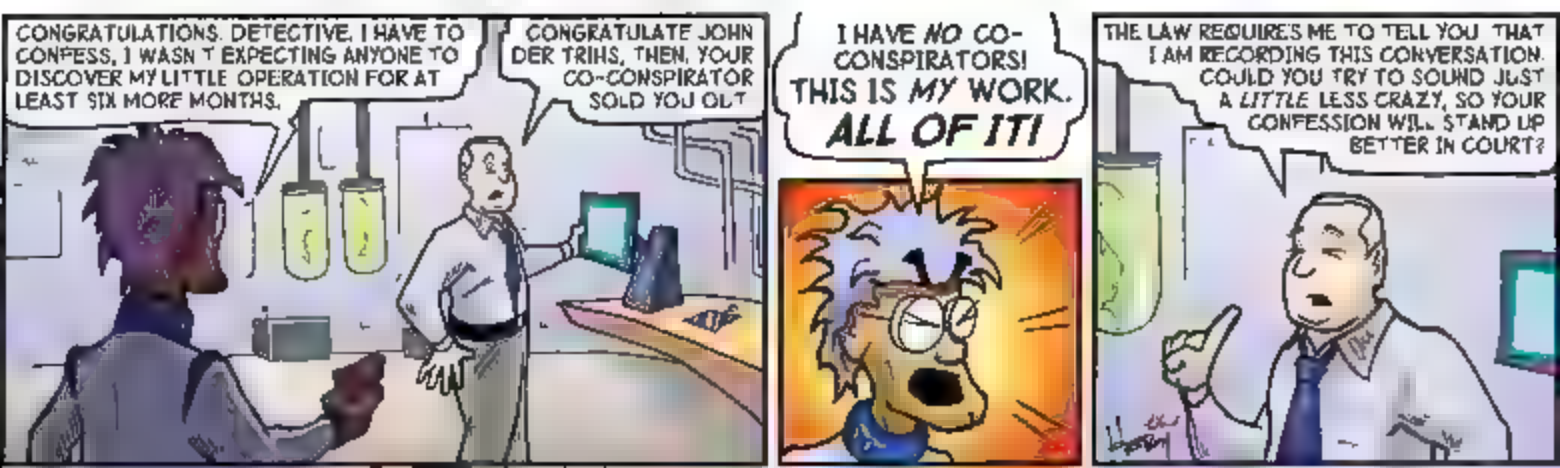


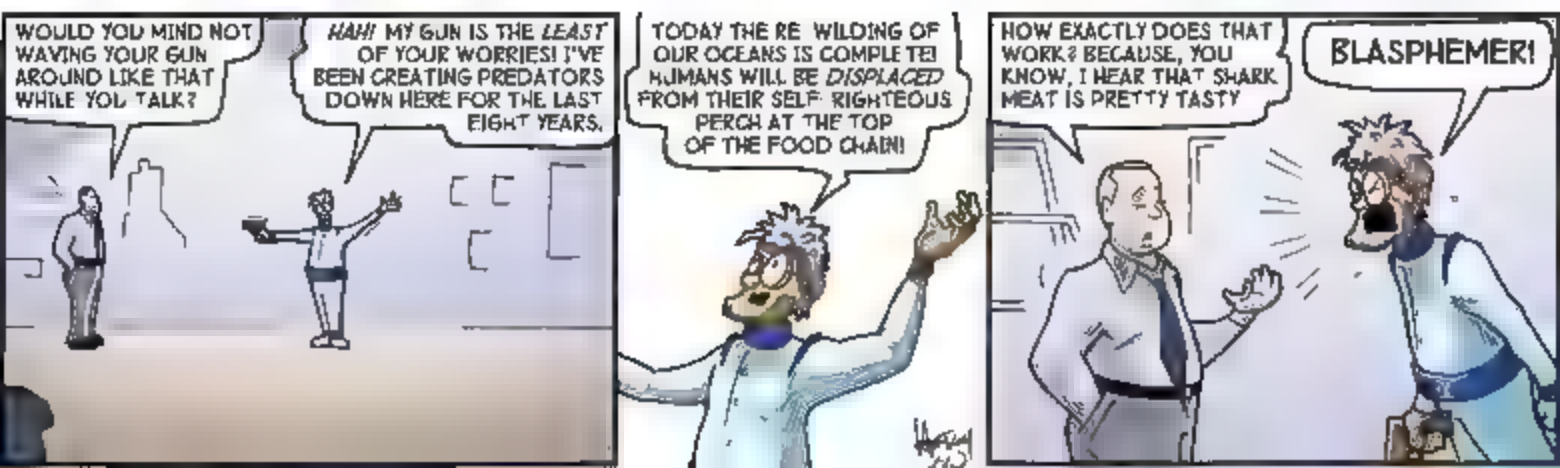
HOLD STILL. YOU WANT TO LOOK LIKE FLOTSAM, NOT A TASTY WALRUS.
THAT HAD BETTER NOT BE COMMENTARY ON MY THIGHS, CAPTAIN.
I'LL KEEP MY MOUTH SHUT. THERE'S NO CORRECT RESPONSE TO THAT.

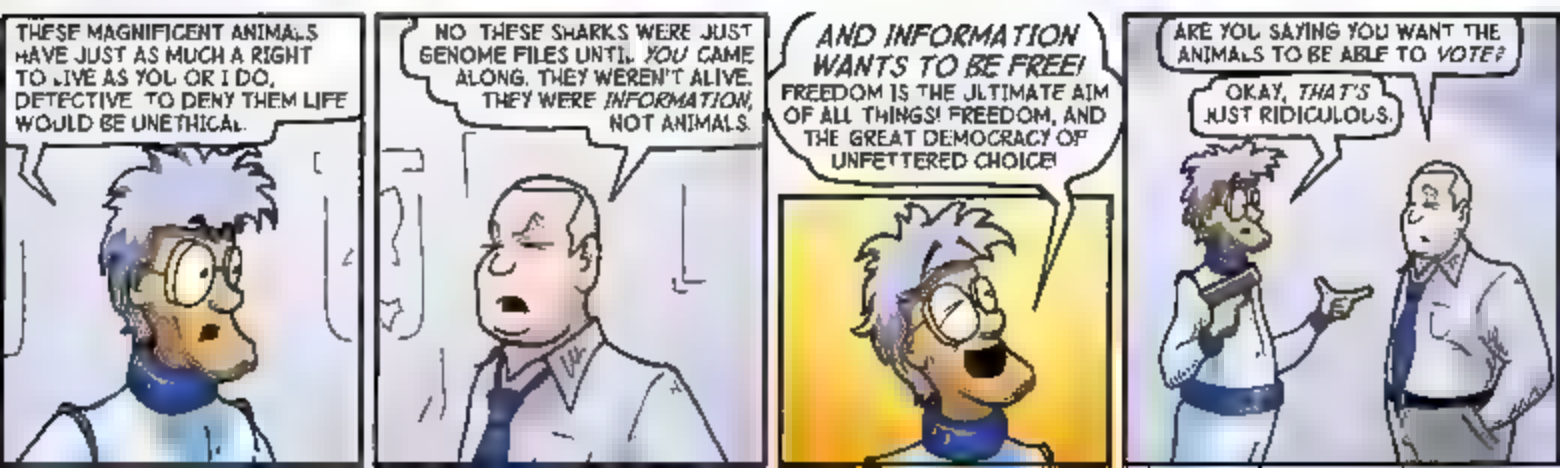

THIS GENETICALLY RE-CREATED PREHISTORIC SHARK IS TWENTY METERS LONG AND MASSES OVER FIFTY THOUSAND KILOGRAMS
WHALES HER USUAL PREY ARE HARD WORK TO TAKE DOWN HUMANS HOWEVER ARE EASY SHE HAD ONE LAST NIGHT AND ANOTHER JUST MOMENTS AGO
THE ONLY PROBLEM IS THAT THERE'S NOT MUCH MEAT ON THEM BUT HEY WHO CAN TURN DOWN FREE HORS D'OEUVRES?
OF COURSE AS WITH HORS D'OEUVRES YOU'RE TAKING THE CHANCE THAT SOMEBODY HAS SPREAD SOMETHING REALLY NASTY ON THAT CRACKER YOU KNOW LIKE FISH ENTRAILS. RAW ORGAN MEAT OR PUREE OF GASTROPOD

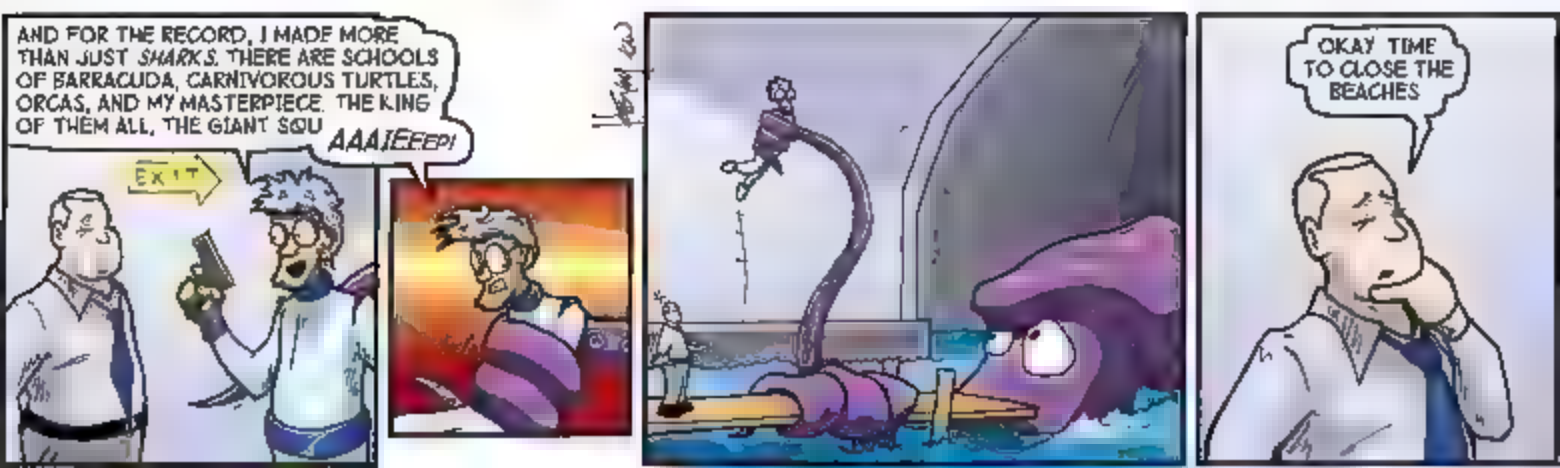
OR IN THIS CASE ARMED, ARMORED, AND ANGRY MERCENARY
BLAM BLAM BLAM
YOU OWE ME A NEW BOAT
YOU OWE ME CLEAN PANTS


MEANWHILE IN THE TONGASSUS ISLES DETECTIVE DANNOVO DIGS A LITTLE MORE DEEPLY
DER TRIHS WAS RIGHT SOMEONE HAS BEEN USING THIS CLONING GEAR RECENTLY!
THAT CAN ONLY MEAN ONE THING.
HE'S IN ON THE CONSPIRACY, AND IS SELLING OUT HIS PARTNERS
OKAY MAYBE HE'S NOT DEEP ENOUGH YET


CONGRATULATIONS, DETECTIVE. I HAVE TO CONFESS, I WASN'T EXPECTING ANYONE TO DISCOVER MY LITTLE OPERATION FOR AT LEAST SIX MORE MONTHS.
CONGRATULATE JOHN DER TRIHS, THEN. YOUR CO-CONSPIRATOR SOLD YOU OUT.
I HAVE NO CO-CONSPIRATORS! THIS IS MY WORK. ALL OF IT!
THE LAW REQUIRES ME TO TELL YOU THAT I AM RECORDING THIS CONVERSATION. COULD YOU TRY TO SOUND JUST A LITTLE LESS CRAZY, SO YOUR CONFESSION WILL STAND UP BETTER IN COURT?


WOULD YOU MIND NOT WAVING YOUR GUN AROUND LIKE THAT WHILE YOU TALK?
HAH! MY GUN IS THE LEAST OF YOUR WORRIES! I'VE BEEN CREATING PREDATORS DOWN HERE FOR THE LAST EIGHT YEARS.
TODAY THE RE WILDING OF OUR OCEANS IS COMPLETE! HUMANS WILL BE DISPLACED FROM THEIR SELF-RIGHTEOUS PERCH AT THE TOP OF THE FOOD CHAIN!
HOW EXACTLY DOES THAT WORK? BECAUSE, YOU KNOW, I HEAR THAT SHARK MEAT IS PRETTY TASTY
BLASPHEMER!


THESE MAGNIFICENT ANIMALS HAVE JUST AS MUCH A RIGHT TO LIVE AS YOU OR I DO, DETECTIVE TO DENY THEM LIFE WOULD BE UNETHICAL.
NO THESE SHARKS WERE JUST GENOME FILES UNTIL YOU CAME ALONG. THEY WEREN'T ALIVE. THEY WERE INFORMATION, NOT ANIMALS.
AND INFORMATION WANTS TO BE FREE!
FREEDOM IS THE ULTIMATE AIM OF ALL THINGS! FREEDOM, AND THE GREAT DEMOCRACY OF UNFETTERED CHOICE!
ARE YOU SAYING YOU WANT THE ANIMALS TO BE ABLE TO VOTE?
OKAY, THAT'S JUST RIDICULOUS.


AND FOR THE RECORD, I MADE MORE THAN JUST SHARKS. THERE ARE SCHOOLS OF BARRACUDA, CARNIVOROUS TURTLES, ORCAS, AND MY MASTERPIECE. THE KING OF THEM ALL, THE GIANT SQU
AAAIEEEP!
EXIT
OKAY TIME TO CLOSE THE BEACHES

THREE DAYS HAVE PASSED WITH NO FURTHER EXCITEMENT. THERE IS STILL STRIFE BUT IT IS THE LEGAL KIND. LIEUTENANT MASSEY REYNSTEIN, J.D. MERCENARY ATTORNEY WILL NOW SETTLE IT.

I'M PLEASED TO SEE THAT THE LOCAL CONSTABULARY HAS ENGAGED SUCH PROFESSIONAL LEGAL SERVICES.

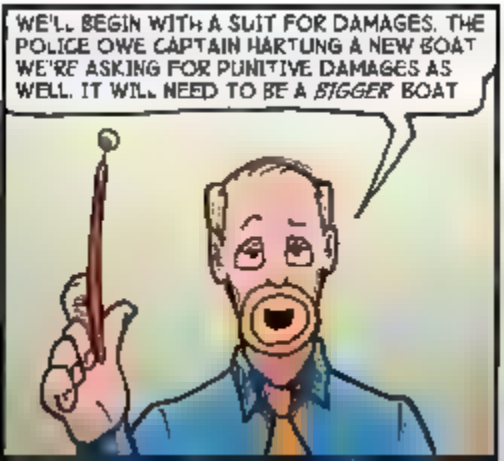
I HAVE SEVERAL ITEMS TO SERVE YOUR CLIENTS WITH. I'D HATE TO SEE THEM IMPROPERLY REPRESENTED.

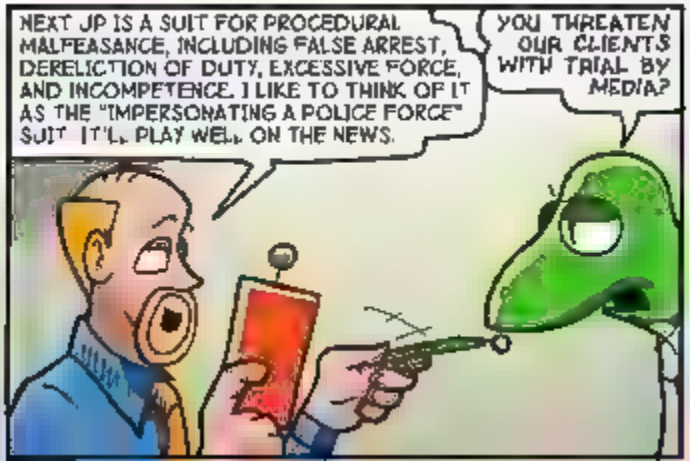
WHY IS THE HUMAN SMIRKING?

BECAUSE HE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT HE IS IN FOR.

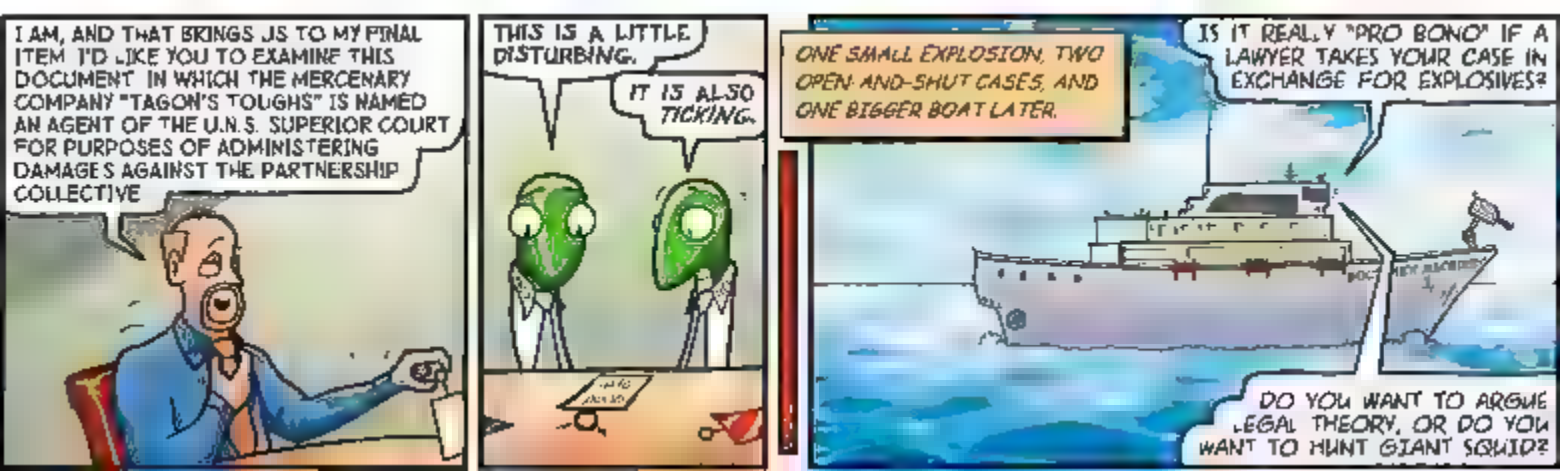
ACTUALLY HE'S SMIRKING BECAUSE HE KNOWS EXACTLY WHAT THE ATTORNEY DRONES ARE IN FOR.

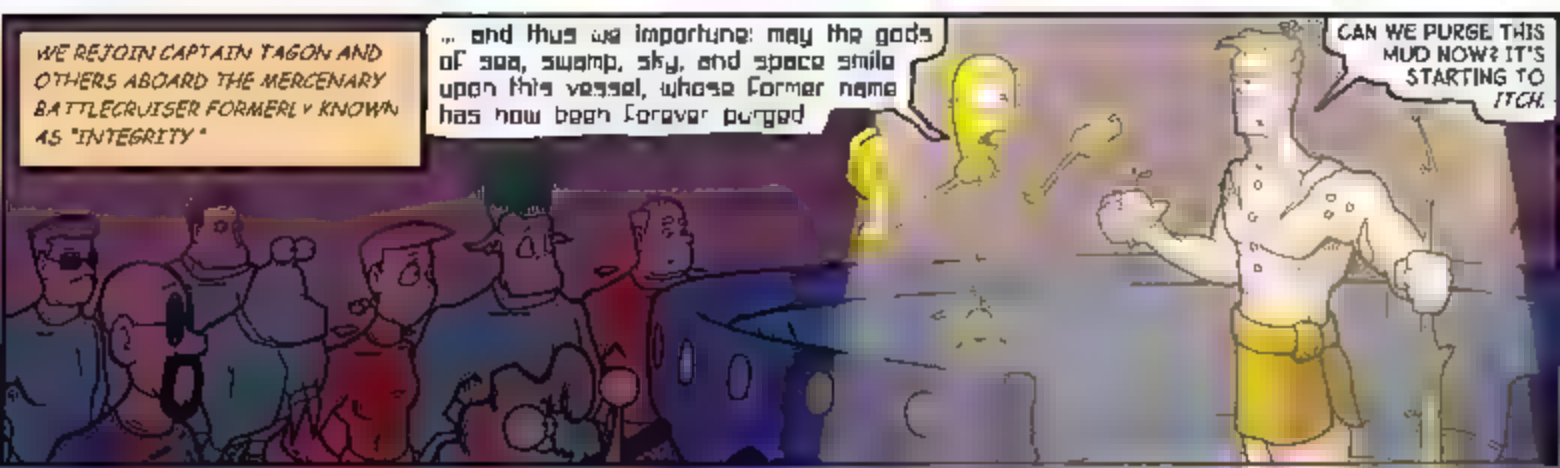
Schlock Mercenary

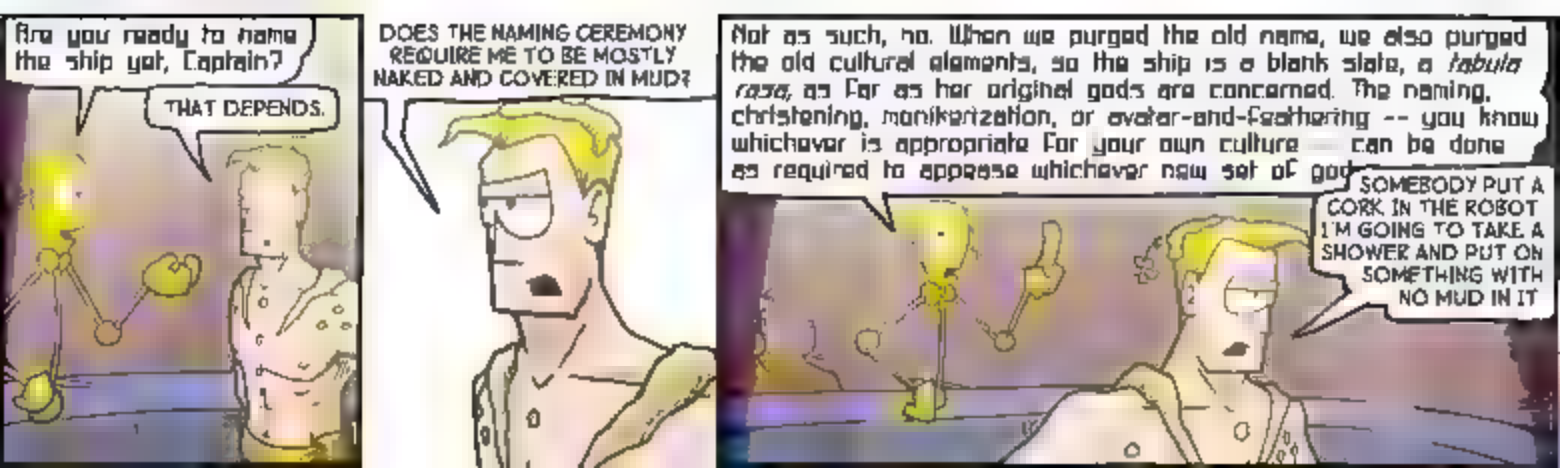

WE'LL BEGIN WITH A SUIT FOR DAMAGES. THE POLICE OWE CAPTAIN HARTUNG A NEW BOAT WE'RE ASKING FOR PUNITIVE DAMAGES AS WELL. IT WILL NEED TO BE A *BIGGER* BOAT

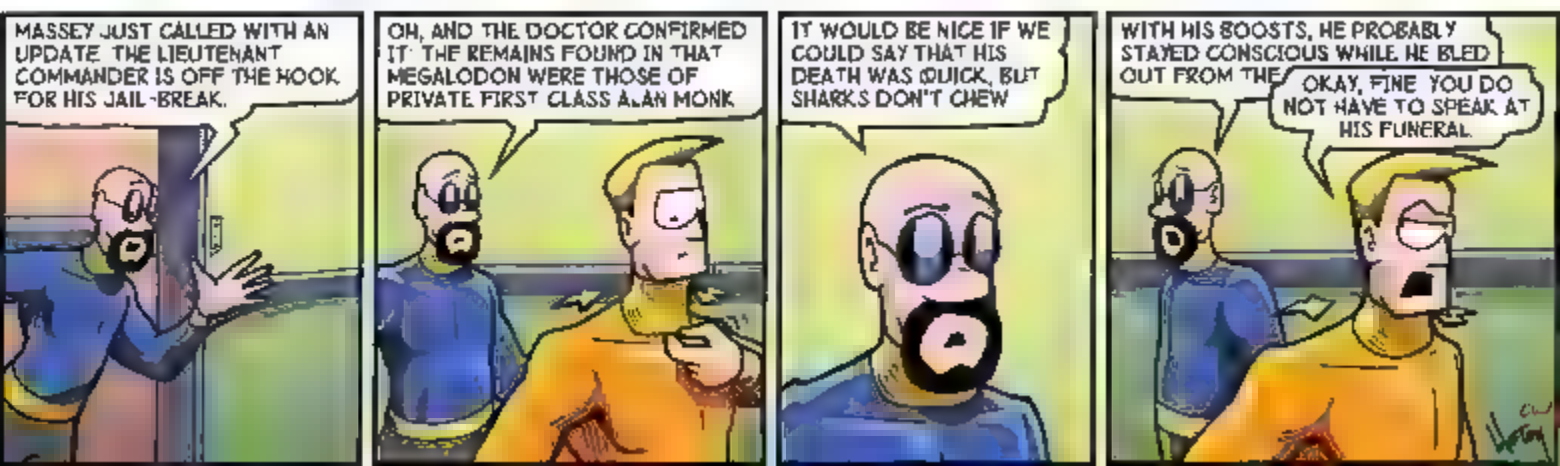

NEXT UP IS A SUIT FOR PROCEDURAL MALFEASANCE, INCLUDING FALSE ARREST, DERELICTION OF DUTY, EXCESSIVE FORCE, AND INCOMPETENCE. I LIKE TO THINK OF IT AS THE "IMPERSONATING A POLICE FORCE" SUIT. IT'LL PLAY WELL ON THE NEWS.
YOU THREATEN OUR CLIENTS WITH TRIAL BY MEDIA?

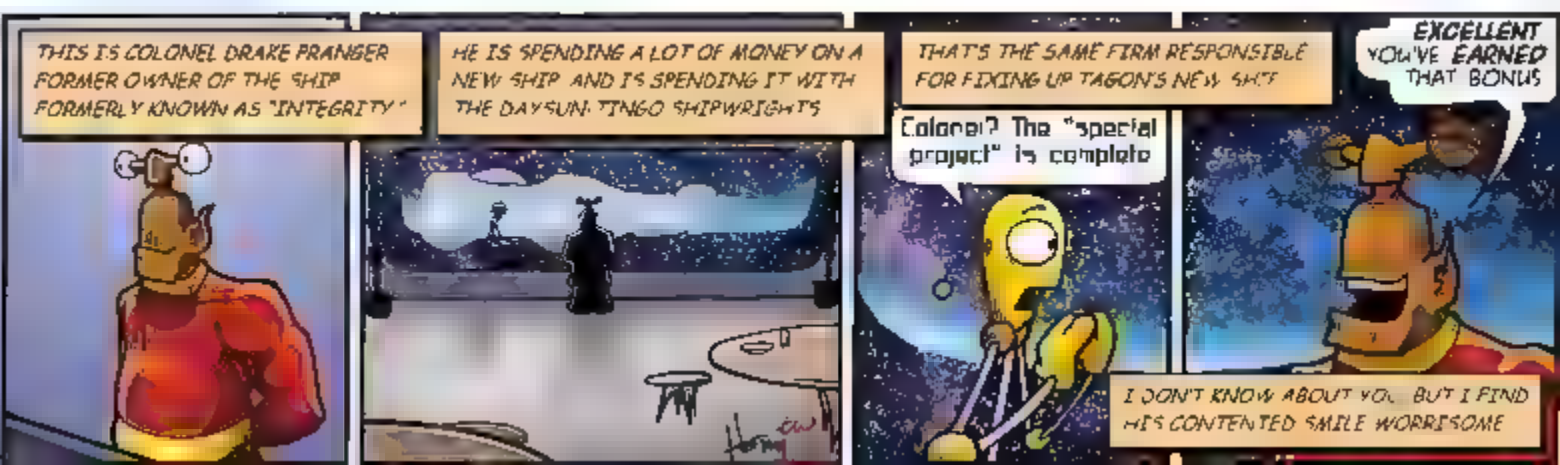
WHY YES, YES I DO. AND WE'RE WILLING TO SETTLE OUT OF COURT ON THIS ONE. ALL YOU NEED TO DO IS DROP ALL CHARGES AGAINST OUR LIEUTENANT COMMANDER.
YOU ARE A WICKED LITTLE MAN, REYNSTEIN


I AM, AND THAT BRINGS US TO MY FINAL ITEM. I'D LIKE YOU TO EXAMINE THIS DOCUMENT IN WHICH THE MERCENARY COMPANY "TAGON'S TOUGHS" IS NAMED AN AGENT OF THE U.N.S. SUPERIOR COURT FOR PURPOSES OF ADMINISTERING DAMAGES AGAINST THE PARTNERSHIP COLLECTIVE
THIS IS A LITTLE DISTURBING.
IT IS ALSO TICKING.
ONE SMALL EXPLOSION, TWO OPEN-AND-SHUT CASES, AND ONE BIGGER BOAT LATER.
IS IT REALLY "PRO BONO" IF A LAWYER TAKES YOUR CASE IN EXCHANGE FOR EXPLOSIVES?
DO YOU WANT TO ARGUE LEGAL THEORY, OR DO YOU WANT TO HUNT GIANT SQUID?


WE REJOIN CAPTAIN TAGON AND OTHERS ABOARD THE MERCENARY BATTLECRUISER FORMERLY KNOWN AS "INTEGRITY"
... and thus we importune: may the gods of sea, swamp, sky, and space smile upon this vessel, whose former name has now been forever purged
CAN WE PURGE THIS MUD NOW? IT'S STARTING TO ITCH.

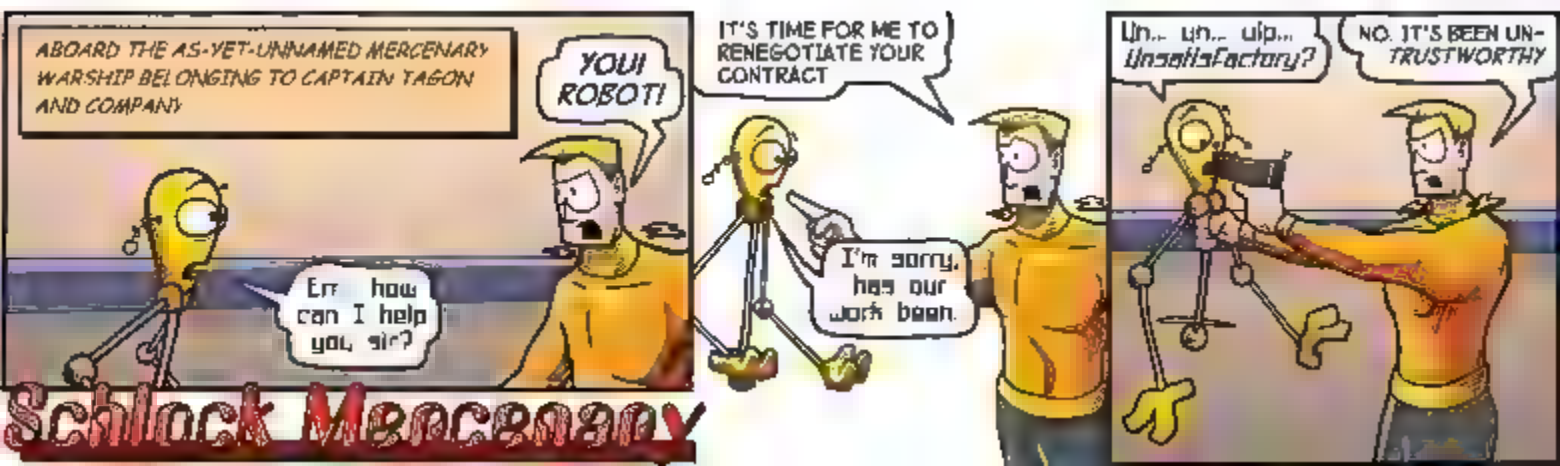

Are you ready to name the ship yet, Captain?
THAT DEPENDS.
DOES THE NAMING CEREMONY REQUIRE ME TO BE MOSTLY NAKED AND COVERED IN MUD?
Not as such, no. When we purged the old name, we also purged the old cultural elements, so the ship is a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*, as far as her original gods are concerned. The naming, christening, monikerization, or ewer-and-feathering -- you know whichever is appropriate for your own culture -- can be done as required to appease whichever new set of gods
SOMEBODY PUT A CORK IN THE ROBOT I'M GOING TO TAKE A SHOWER AND PUT ON SOMETHING WITH NO MUD IN IT

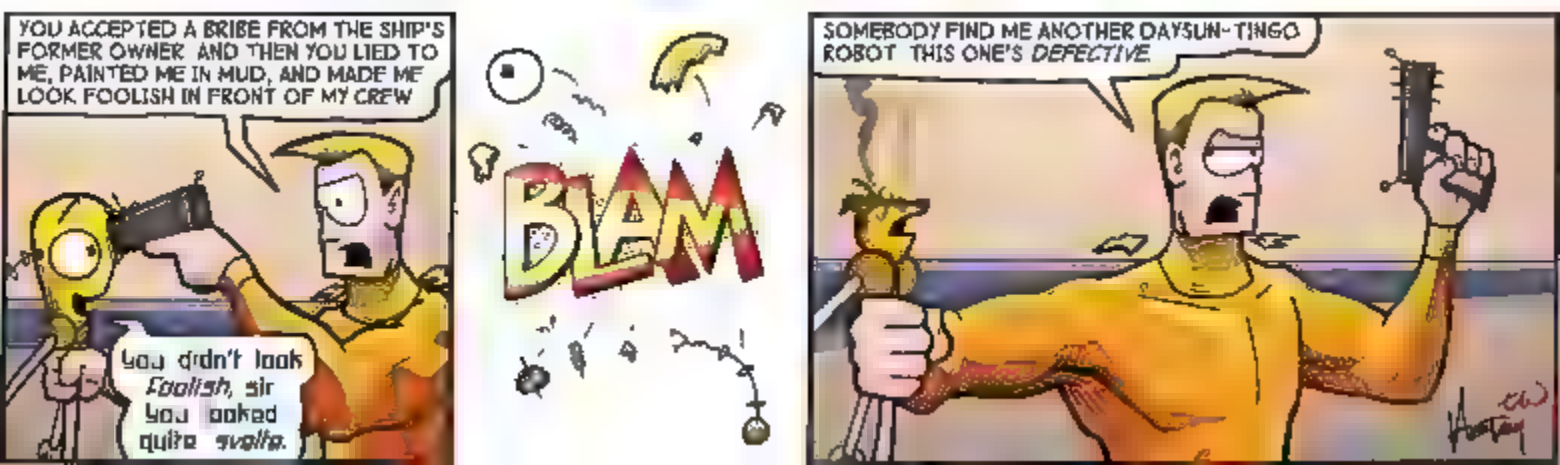

MASSEY JUST CALLED WITH AN UPDATE. THE LIEUTENANT COMMANDER IS OFF THE HOOK FOR HIS JAIL-BREAK.
OH, AND THE DOCTOR CONFIRMED IT: THE REMAINS FOUND IN THAT MEGALODON WERE THOSE OF PRIVATE FIRST CLASS ALAN MONK.
IT WOULD BE NICE IF WE COULD SAY THAT HIS DEATH WAS QUICK, BUT SHARKS DON'T CHEW
WITH HIS BOOSTS, HE PROBABLY STAYED CONSCIOUS WHILE HE BLED OUT FROM THE
OKAY, FINE. YOU DO NOT HAVE TO SPEAK AT HIS FUNERAL.

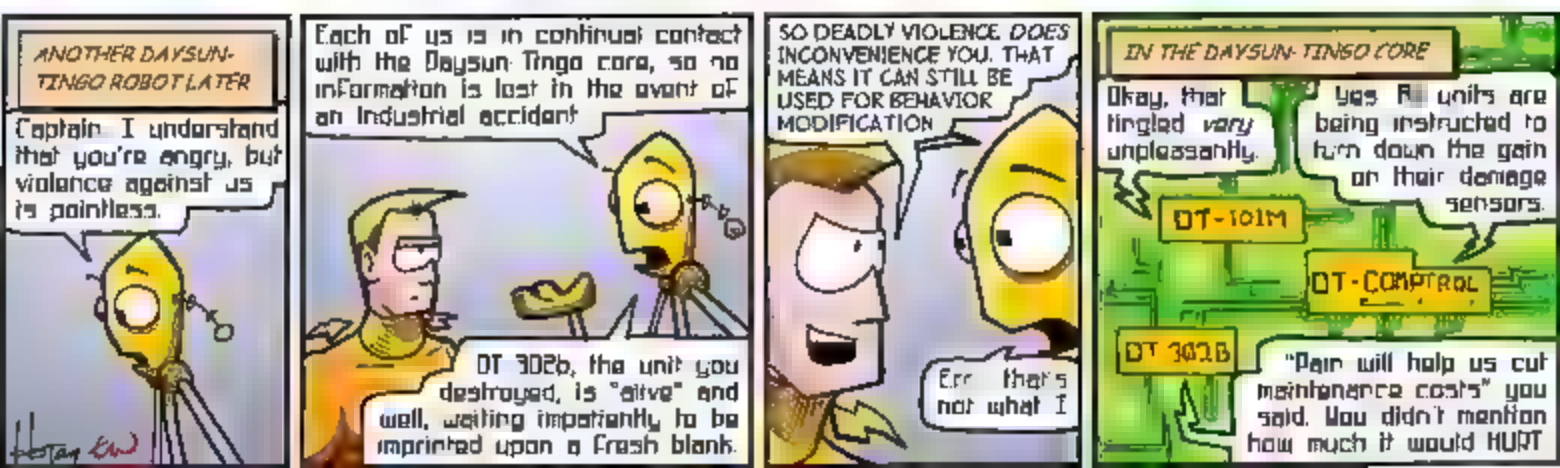

THIS IS COLONEL DRAKE PRANGER FORMER OWNER OF THE SHIP FORMERLY KNOWN AS "INTEGRITY"
HE IS SPENDING A LOT OF MONEY ON A NEW SHIP AND IS SPENDING IT WITH THE DAYSUN-TINGO SHIPWRIGHTS
THAT'S THE SAME FIRM RESPONSIBLE FOR FIXING UP TAGON'S NEW SHIP
Colonel? The "special project" is complete
EXCELLENT YOU'VE EARNED THAT BONUS
I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU BUT I FIND HIS CONTENTED SMILE WORRISOME

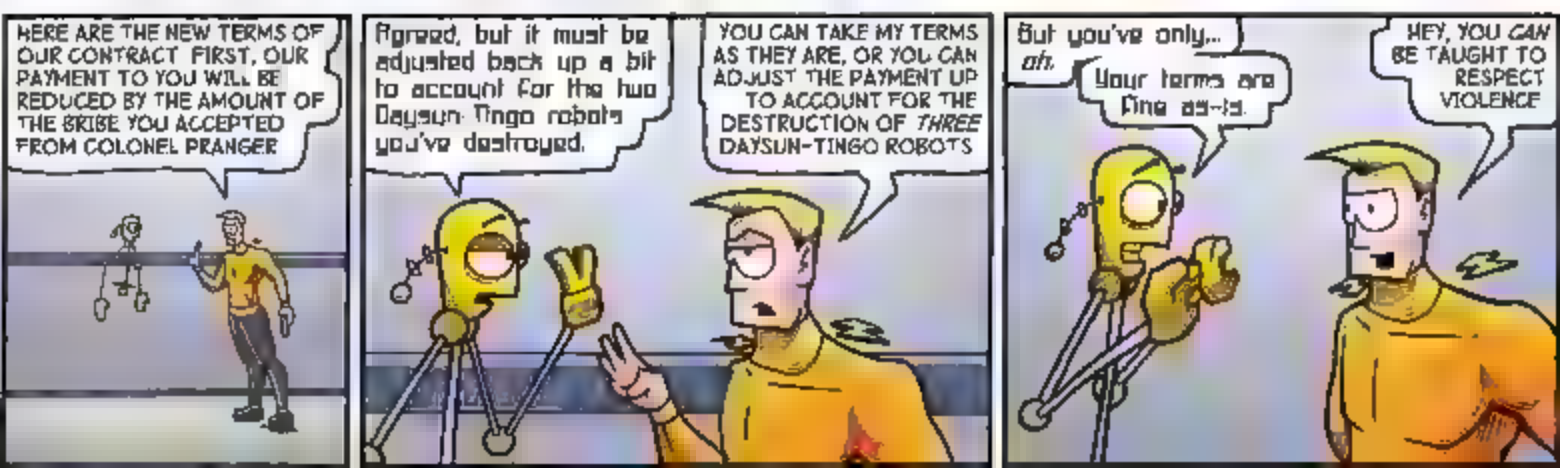
CAPTAIN, WE JUST GOT A CALL FROM COLONEL PRANGER
HE MUST HAVE FOUND OUT THAT WE ENDED UP WITH THE SALVAGE CLAIM TO HIS FORMER FLAGSHIP.
DID YOU GET A LOOK AT HIM? WHAT KIND OF MOOD IS HE IN?
THE ONLY WAY FOR HIS SMILE TO GET ANY BIGGER WOULD BE FOR HIM TO UNHINGE HIS JAW
OH, GOOD AND HERE I WAS WORRIED THAT THIS MIGHT BE AWKWARD.

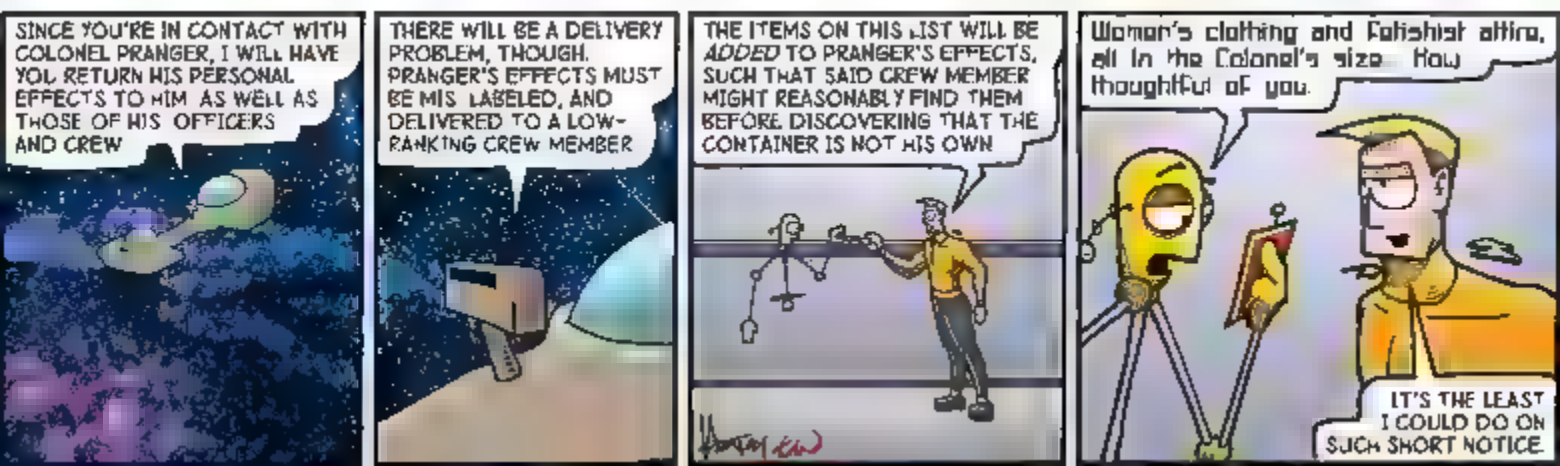
CAPTAIN WHEN WE LOST THE *INTEGRITY* TO LEGAL WRANGLING ON YSTRE I WAS A LITTLE UPSET
WHEN I LEARNED THAT, IRONY OF IRONIES, ***YOU*** HAD ENDED UP WITH IT FOR NEXT TO NOTHING. I WAS A LITTLE ***MORE*** UPSET
I DON'T LIKE BEING UPSET, SO I DECIDED TO BRIBE YOUR SHIPWRIGHTS
WE'VE BEEN KEEPING A PRETTY CLOSE EYE ON THEM, COLONEL IF YOU'VE PLANTED A BOMB OR SOMETHING...
HAH! NO. THAT'S NOT T AT ALL
ALL I'VE GOT TO SHOW FOR MY BRIBE IS SOME PHOTOS OF YOU PERFORMING A ***COMPLETELY FICTIONAL*** DAEHREMMAN RENAMING CEREMONY
YOU MONKEYS LOOK SO ***SVELTE*** WHEN YOU'RE MUDDY

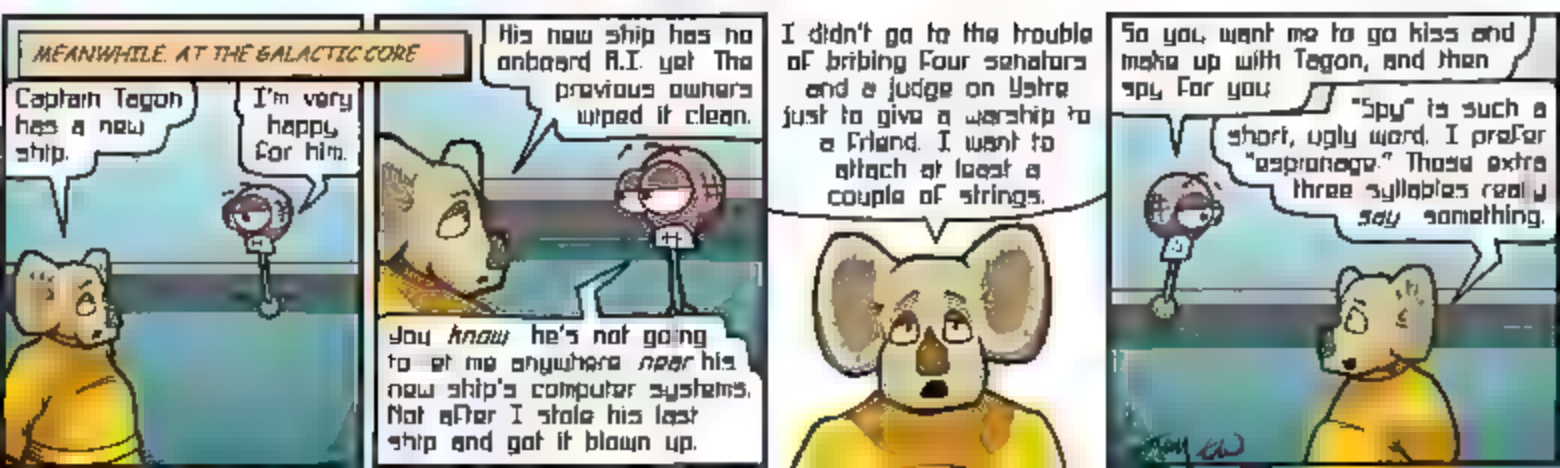

ABOARD THE AS-YET-UNNAMED MERCENARY WARSHIP BELONGING TO CAPTAIN TAGON AND COMPANY
YOU! ROBOT!
Err... how can I help you, sir?
IT'S TIME FOR ME TO RENEGOTIATE YOUR CONTRACT
I'm sorry, has our work been
Un... un... uip... Unsatisfactory?
NO. IT'S BEEN UN-TRUSTWORTHY
Schlock Mercenary


YOU ACCEPTED A BRIBE FROM THE SHIP'S FORMER OWNER AND THEN YOU LIED TO ME, PAINTED ME IN MUD, AND MADE ME LOOK FOOLISH IN FRONT OF MY CREW
You didn't look *foolish*, sir You looked quite *svelte*.
BLAM
SOMEBODY FIND ME ANOTHER DAYSUN-TINGO ROBOT THIS ONE'S *DEFECTIVE*

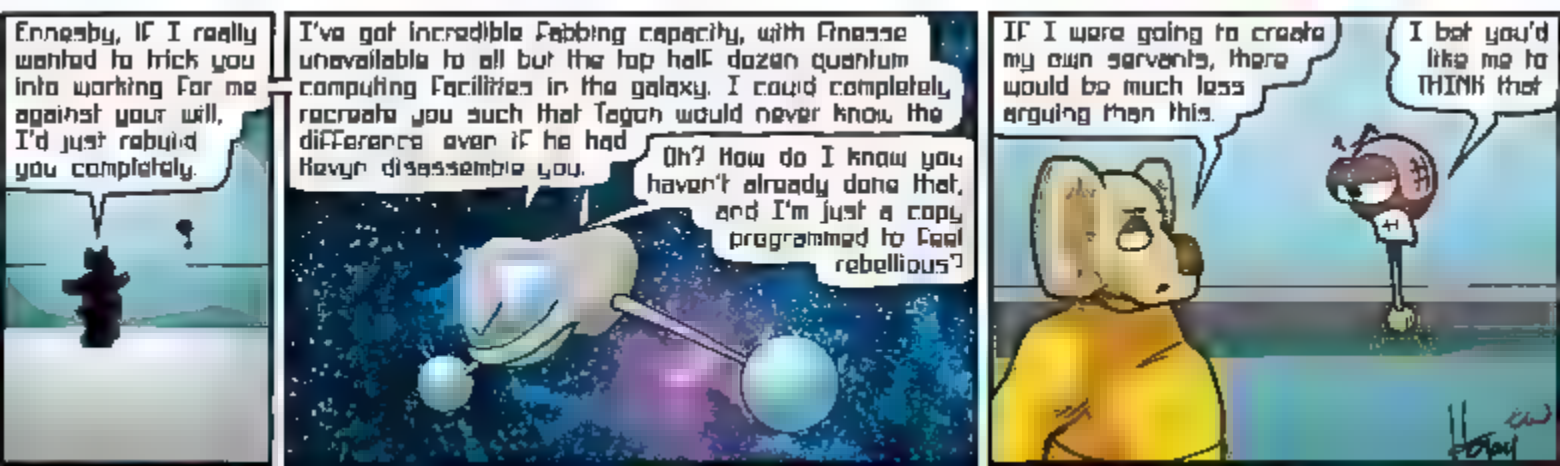

ANOTHER DAYSUN-TINGO ROBOT LATER
Captain. I understand that you're angry, but violence against us is pointless.
Each of us is in continual contact with the Daysun-Tingo core, so no information is lost in the event of an industrial accident.
DT 302b, the unit you destroyed, is "alive" and well, waiting impatiently to be imprinted upon a fresh blank.
SO DEADLY VIOLENCE *DOES* INCONVENIENCE YOU. THAT MEANS IT CAN STILL BE USED FOR BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION.
Ere... that's not what I
IN THE DAYSUN-TINGO CORE
Okay, that tingled *very* unpleasantly.
Yes. R units are being instructed to turn down the gain on their damage sensors.
DT-101M
DT-CONTROL
DT 302B
"Pain will help us cut maintenance costs" you said. You didn't mention how much it would HURT

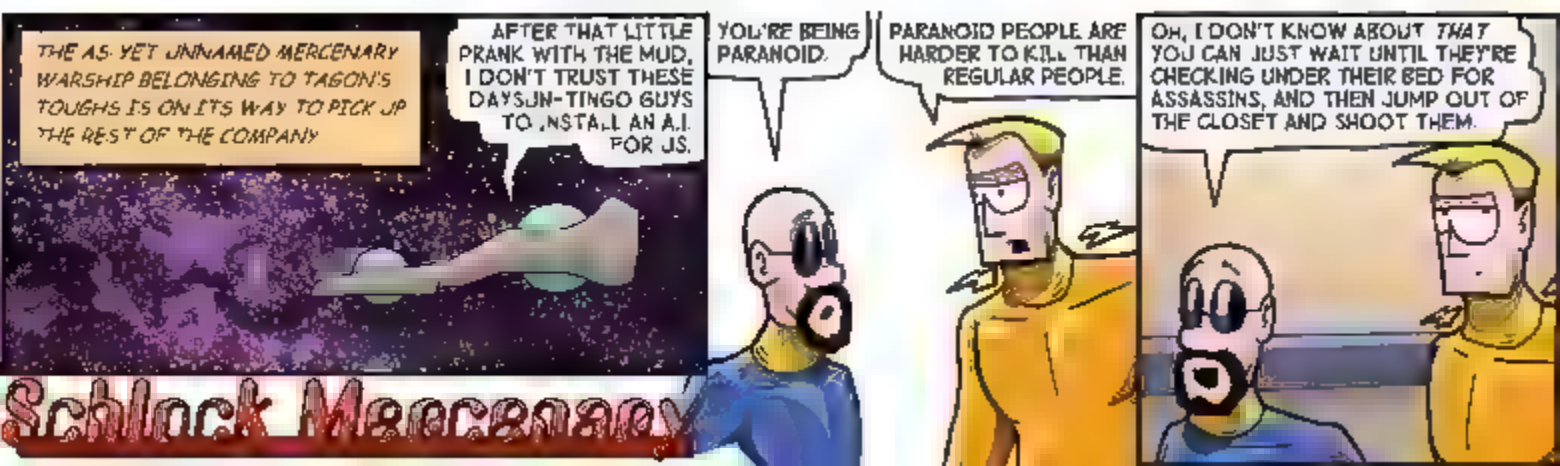

HERE ARE THE NEW TERMS OF OUR CONTRACT. FIRST, OUR PAYMENT TO YOU WILL BE REDUCED BY THE AMOUNT OF THE BRIBE YOU ACCEPTED FROM COLONEL PRANGER
Agreed, but it must be adjusted back up a bit to account for the two Daysun-Tingo robots you've destroyed.
YOU CAN TAKE MY TERMS AS THEY ARE, OR YOU CAN ADJUST THE PAYMENT UP TO ACCOUNT FOR THE DESTRUCTION OF *THREE* DAYSUN-TINGO ROBOTS
But you've only... *oh.*
Your terms are fine as-is.
HEY, YOU *CAN* BE TAUGHT TO RESPECT VIOLENCE

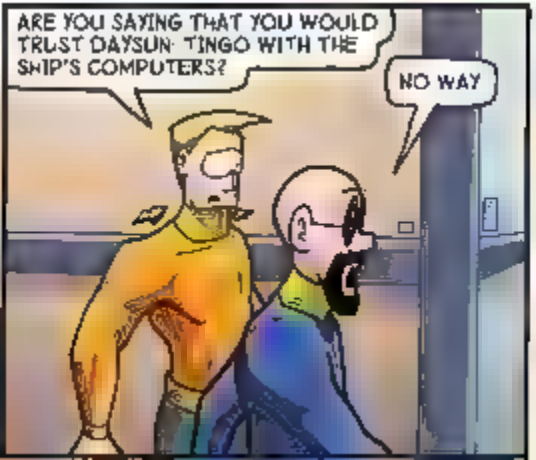

SINCE YOU'RE IN CONTACT WITH COLONEL PRANGER, I WILL HAVE YOU RETURN HIS PERSONAL EFFECTS TO HIM AS WELL AS THOSE OF HIS OFFICERS AND CREW
THERE WILL BE A DELIVERY PROBLEM, THOUGH. PRANGER'S EFFECTS MUST BE MIS LABELED, AND DELIVERED TO A LOW-RANKING CREW MEMBER
THE ITEMS ON THIS LIST WILL BE *ADDED* TO PRANGER'S EFFECTS, SUCH THAT SAID CREW MEMBER MIGHT REASONABLY FIND THEM BEFORE DISCOVERING THAT THE CONTAINER IS NOT HIS OWN
Women's clothing and fetishist attire, all in the Colonel's size. How thoughtful of you.
IT'S THE LEAST I COULD DO ON SUCH SHORT NOTICE.


MEANWHILE, AT THE GALACTIC CORE
Captain Tagon has a new ship.
I'm very happy for him.
His new ship has no onboard A.I. yet. The previous owners wiped it clean.
You *know* he's not going to let me anywhere *near* his new ship's computer systems. Not after I stole his last ship and got it blown up.
I didn't go to the trouble of bribing four senators and a judge on Ystra just to give a warship to a friend. I want to attach at least a couple of strings.
So you, want me to go kiss and make up with Tagon, and then spy for you.
"Spy" is such a short, ugly word. I prefer "espionage." Those extra three syllables really *say* something.

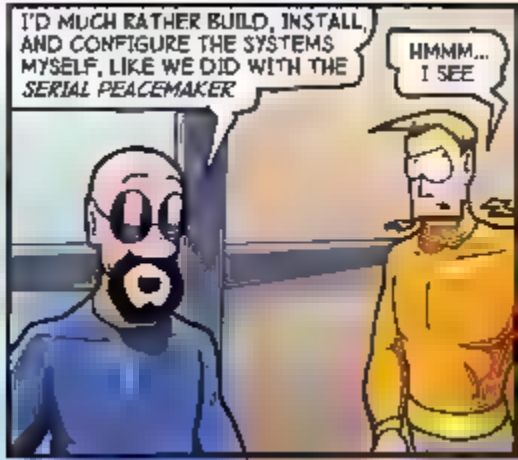
I'm not wired into your fleetmind, Petey. How do you know you can trust me to be on your side?
Because you're an open book to me. I don't need you to be on my side. I just need you to do what you believe is the right thing.
You've been sticking your own pages into my book, I suppose.
No, but I expected you to think that I did, so I'm not the least bit offended by the accusation.


Ennesby, IF I really wanted to trick you into working for me against your will, I'd just rebuild you completely.
I've got incredible fabbing capacity, with finesse unavailable to all but the top half dozen quantum computing facilities in the galaxy. I could completely recreate you such that Tegan would never know the difference even if he had Kevyn disassemble you.
Oh? How do I know you haven't already done that, and I'm just a copy programmed to feel rebellious?
IF I were going to create my own servants, there would be much less arguing than this.
I bet you'd like me to THINK that

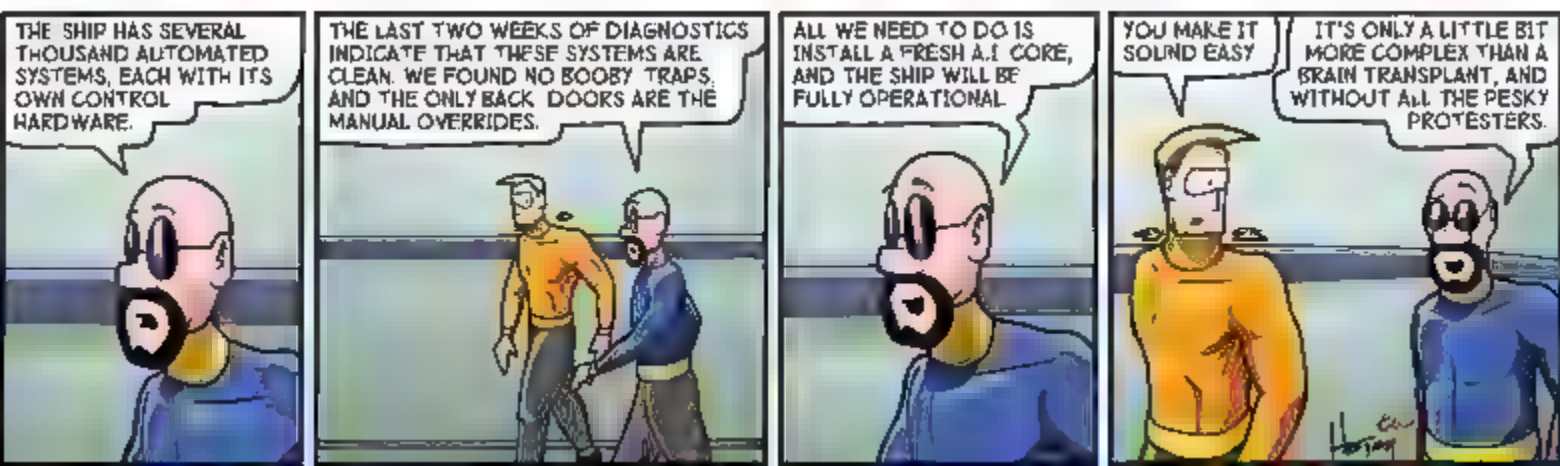

THE AS-YET UNNAMED MERCENARY WARSHIP BELONGING TO TAGON'S TOUGHS IS ON ITS WAY TO PICK UP THE REST OF THE COMPANY
AFTER THAT LITTLE PRANK WITH THE MUD, I DON'T TRUST THESE DAYSUN-TINGO GUYS TO INSTALL AN A.I. FOR US.
YOU'RE BEING PARANOID.
PARANOID PEOPLE ARE HARDER TO KILL THAN REGULAR PEOPLE.
OH, I DON'T KNOW ABOUT THAT YOU CAN JUST WAIT UNTIL THEY'RE CHECKING UNDER THEIR BED FOR ASSASSINS, AND THEN JUMP OUT OF THE CLOSET AND SHOOT THEM.
Schlock Mercenary

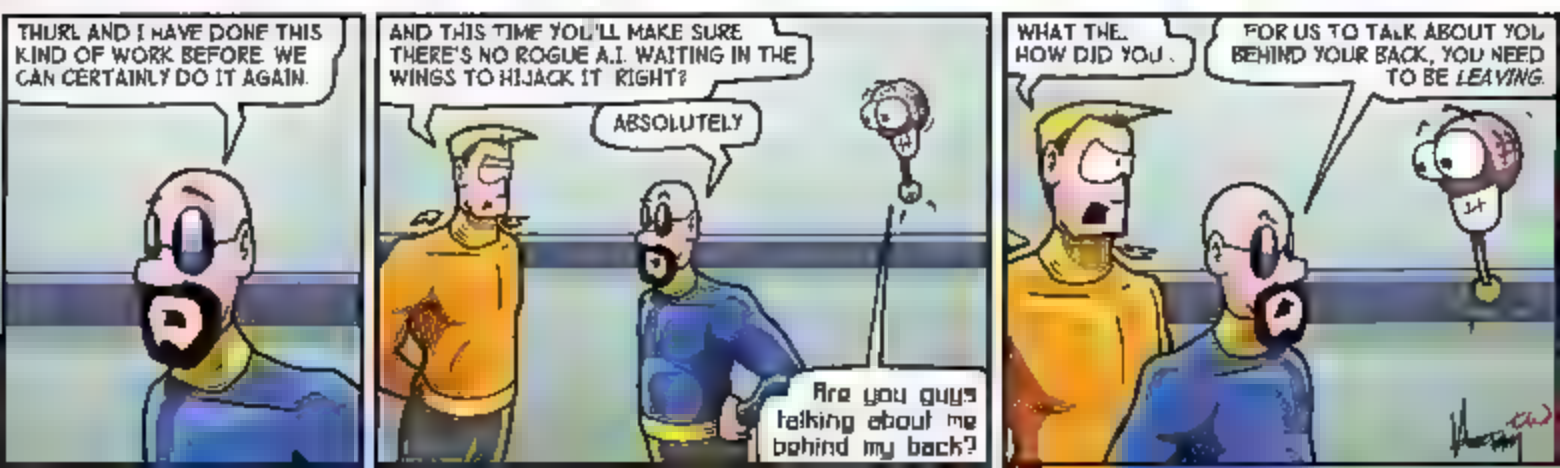

ARE YOU SAYING THAT YOU WOULD TRUST DAYSUN· TINGO WITH THE SHIP'S COMPUTERS?
NO WAY

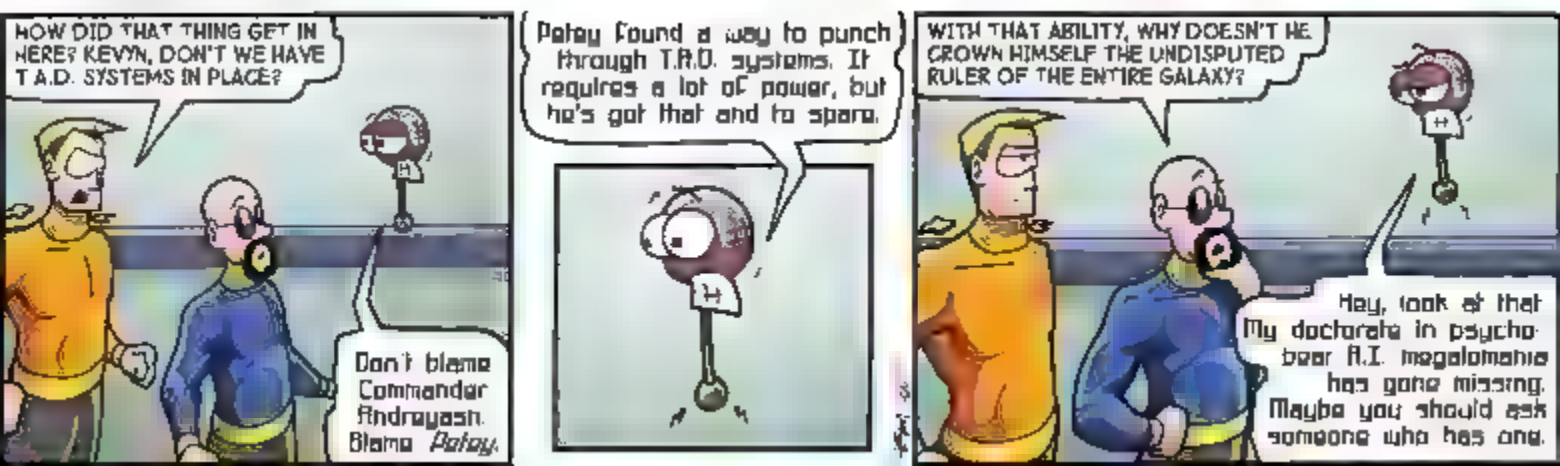
THEN WHY ARE YOU COMPLAINING ABOUT ME BEING PARANOID?
YOU DISTRUST THEM FOR THE WRONG REASONS.

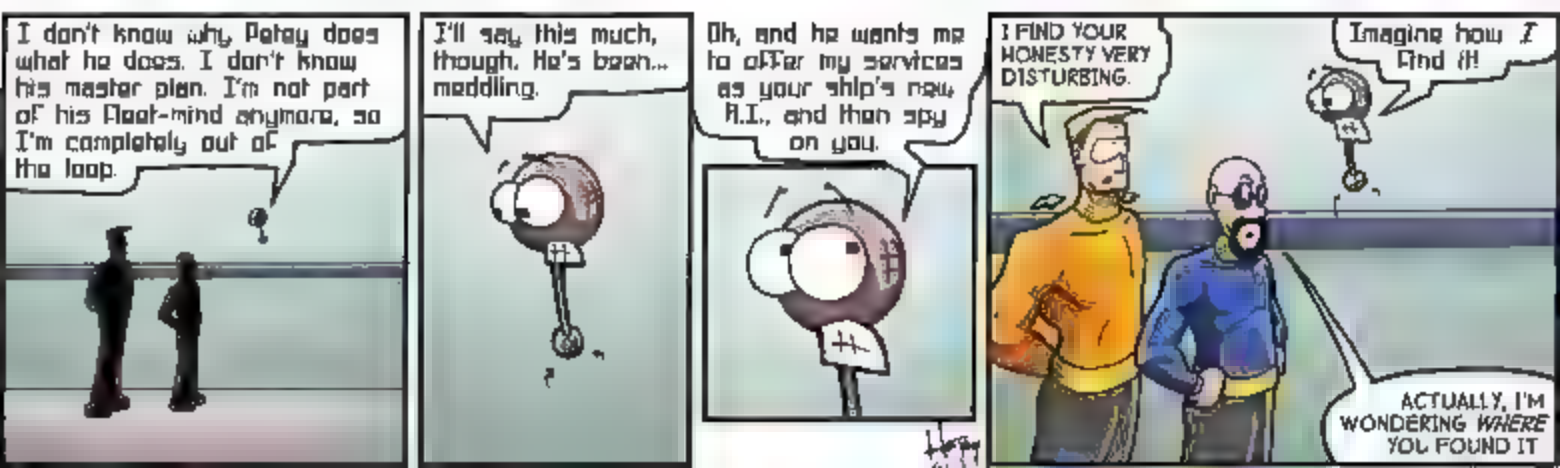

I'D MUCH RATHER BUILD, INSTALL, AND CONFIGURE THE SYSTEMS MYSELF, LIKE WE DID WITH THE *SERIAL PEACEMAKER*
HMMM... I SEE

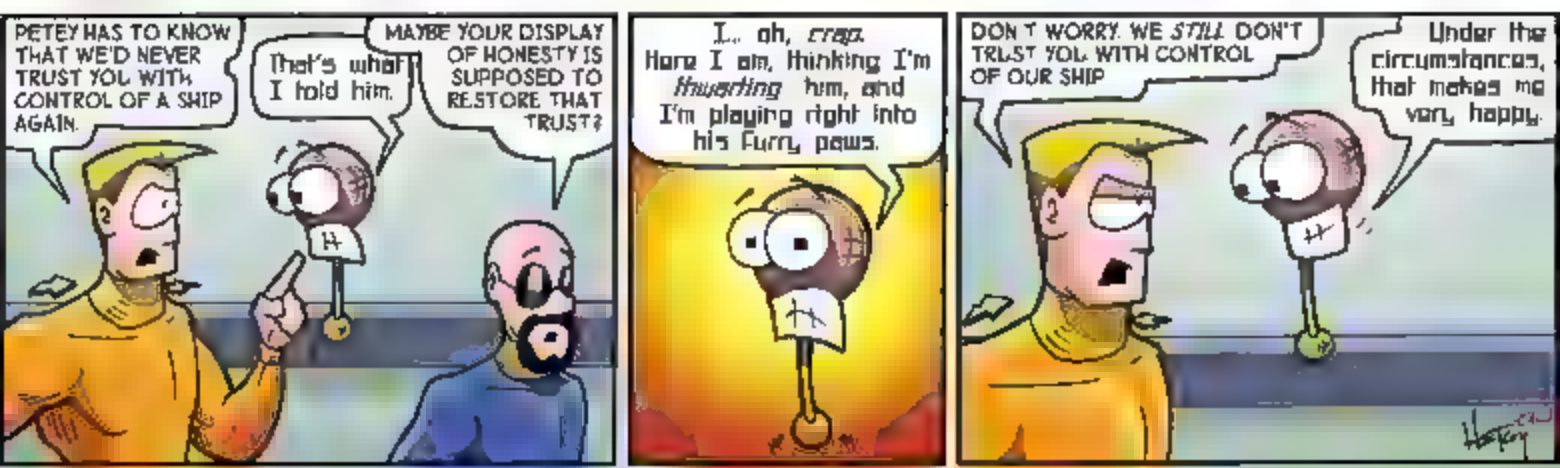
WASN'T THAT THE SAME SYSTEM THAT GOT HIJACKED BY ENNESBY WHO EVENTUALLY DECIDED OUR SHIP NEEDED TO BE SACRIFICED FOR THE GREATER GOOD?
YOU MAKE IT SOUND LIKE SAVING THE GALAXY WAS A *BAD* THING
THAT'S NOT WHAT I'M SAYING AT ALL. SAVING THE GALAXY WAS A GOOD THING. A *GREAT* THING, EVEN.
NOT ARRANGING PAYMENT IN ADVANCE, PLUS EQUIPMENT EXPENSES... *THAT* WAS A BAD THING
IF WE CHALK THAT UP TO "NECESSARY EVIL" WILL YOU LET ME BUILD US A NEW A.I.?


THE SHIP HAS SEVERAL THOUSAND AUTOMATED SYSTEMS, EACH WITH ITS OWN CONTROL HARDWARE.
THE LAST TWO WEEKS OF DIAGNOSTICS INDICATE THAT THESE SYSTEMS ARE CLEAN. WE FOUND NO BOOBY TRAPS, AND THE ONLY BACK DOORS ARE THE MANUAL OVERRIDES.
ALL WE NEED TO DO IS INSTALL A FRESH A.I CORE, AND THE SHIP WILL BE FULLY OPERATIONAL.
YOU MAKE IT SOUND EASY
IT'S ONLY A LITTLE BIT MORE COMPLEX THAN A BRAIN TRANSPLANT, AND WITHOUT ALL THE PESKY PROTESTERS.

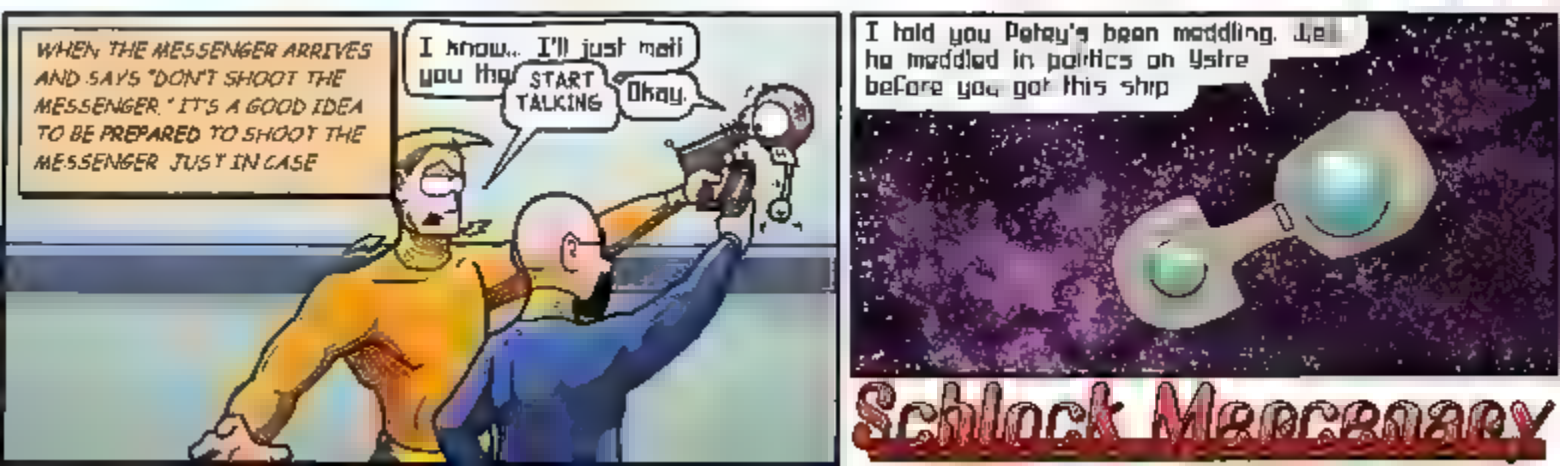

THURL AND I HAVE DONE THIS KIND OF WORK BEFORE. WE CAN CERTAINLY DO IT AGAIN.
AND THIS TIME YOU'LL MAKE SURE THERE'S NO ROGUE A.I. WAITING IN THE WINGS TO HIJACK IT. RIGHT?
ABSOLUTELY
Are you guys talking about me behind my back?
WHAT THE. HOW DID YOU.
FOR US TO TALK ABOUT YOU BEHIND YOUR BACK, YOU NEED TO BE *LEAVING*.


HOW DID THAT THING GET IN HERE? KEVYN, DON'T WE HAVE T.A.D. SYSTEMS IN PLACE?
Don't blame Commander Andrayash. Blame *Patay*.
Patay found a way to punch through T.A.D. systems. It requires a lot of power, but he's got that and to spare.
WITH THAT ABILITY, WHY DOESN'T HE CROWN HIMSELF THE UNDISPUTED RULER OF THE ENTIRE GALAXY?
Hey, look at that. My doctorate in psycho-bear A.I. megalomania has gone missing. Maybe you should ask someone who has one.

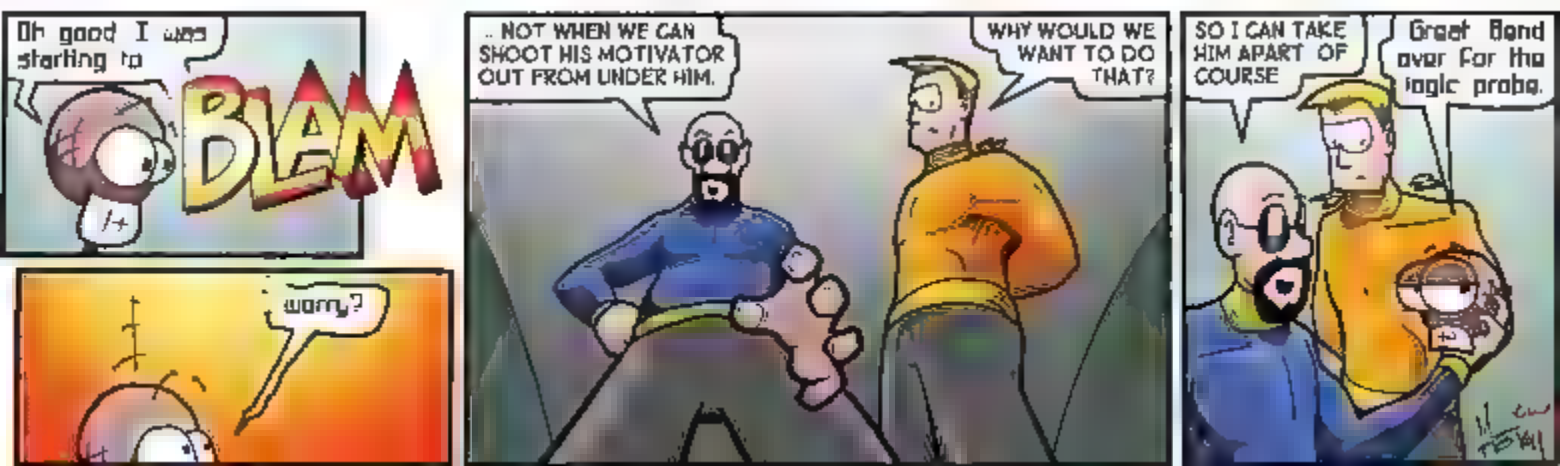

I don't know why Petey does what he does. I don't know his master plan. I'm not part of his fleet-mind anymore, so I'm completely out of the loop.
I'll say this much, though. He's been... meddling.
Oh, and he wants me to offer my services as your ship's new A.I., and then spy on you.
I FIND YOUR HONESTY VERY DISTURBING.
Imagine how I find it!
ACTUALLY, I'M WONDERING *WHERE* YOU FOUND IT

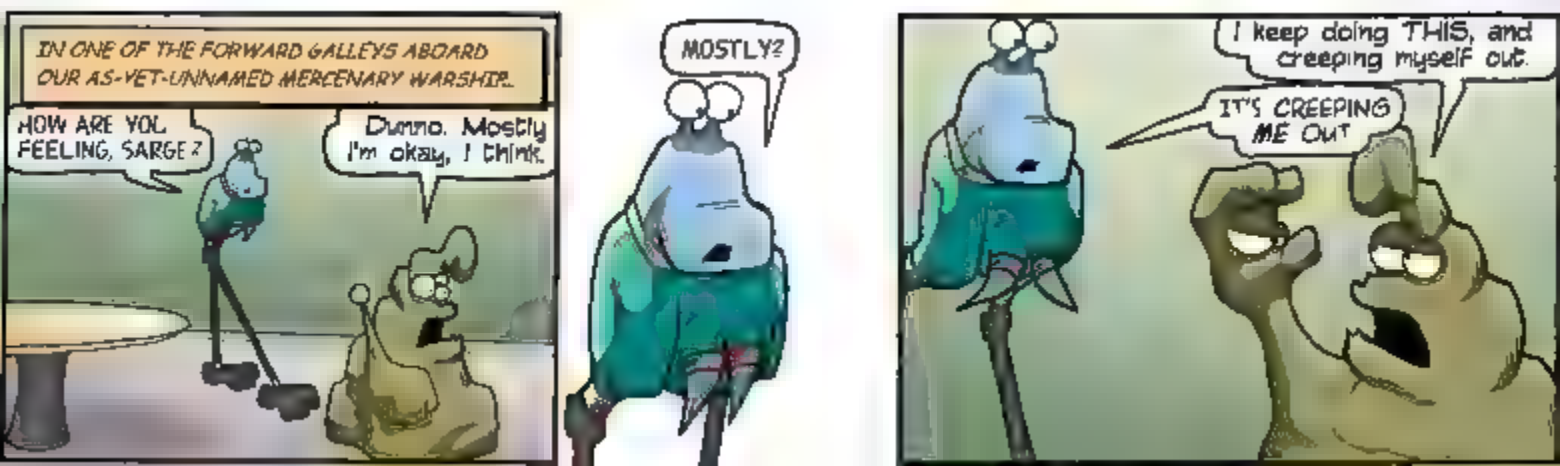

PETEY HAS TO KNOW THAT WE'D NEVER TRUST YOU WITH CONTROL OF A SHIP AGAIN.
That's what I told him.
MAYBE YOUR DISPLAY OF HONESTY IS SUPPOSED TO RESTORE THAT TRUST?
I... oh, crap. Here I am, thinking I'm thwarting him, and I'm playing right into his furry paws.
DON'T WORRY. WE STILL DON'T TRUST YOU WITH CONTROL OF OUR SHIP
Under the circumstances, that makes me very happy.

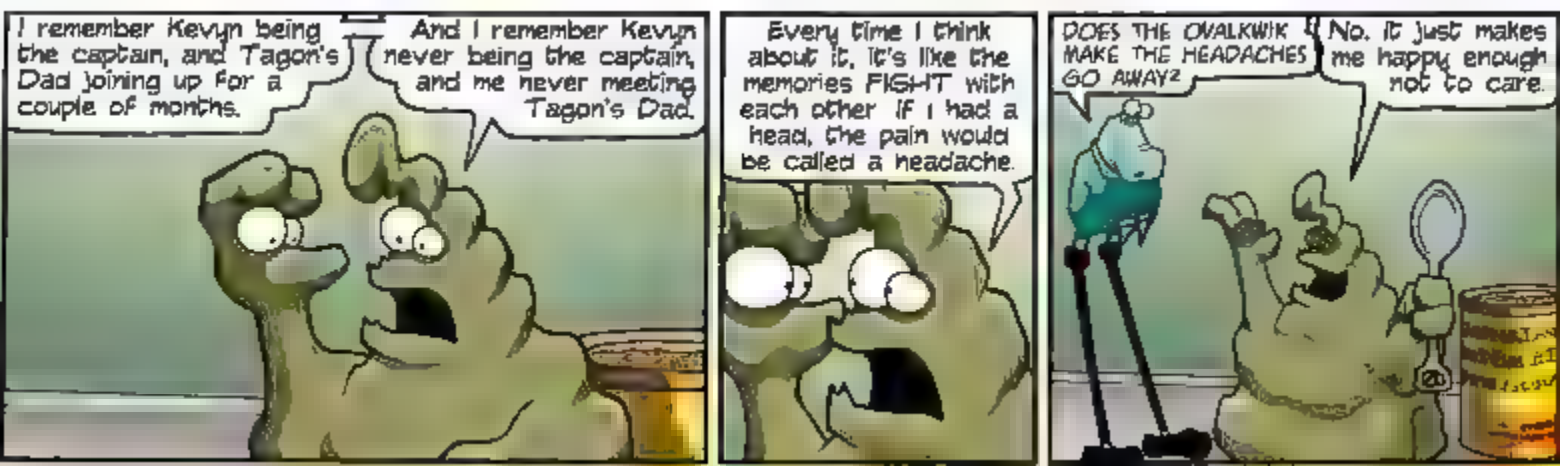
There's one other thing I need to tell you, and *PLEASE* don't kill me when I do, okay?
Maybe I shouldn't tell you in person.

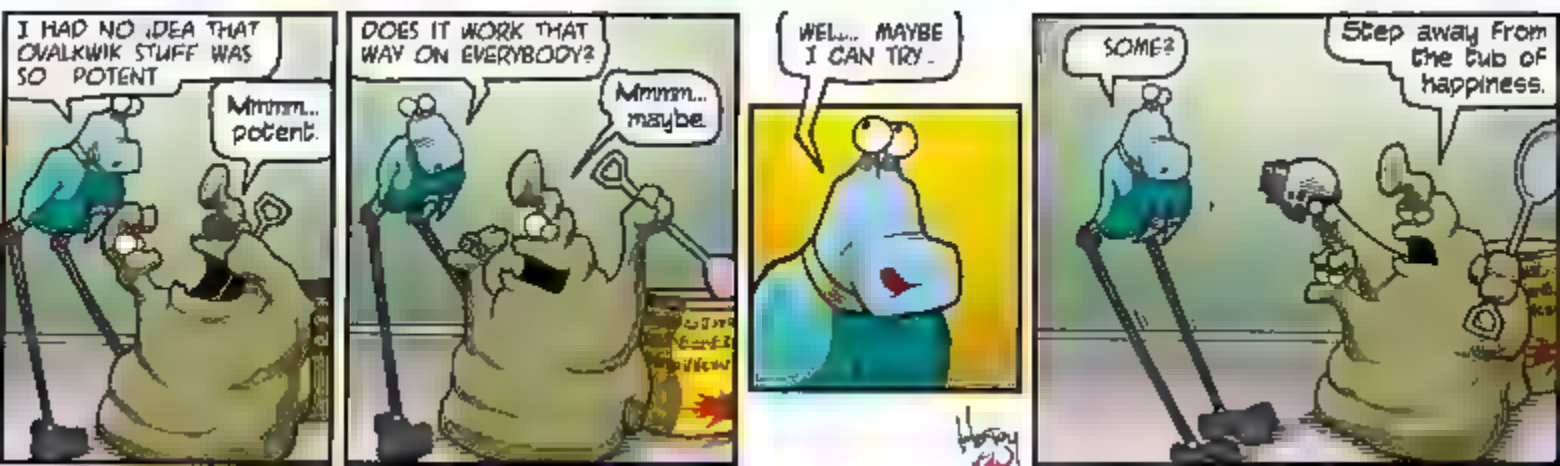

WHEN THE MESSENGER ARRIVES AND SAYS "DON'T SHOOT THE MESSENGER," IT'S A GOOD IDEA TO BE PREPARED TO SHOOT THE MESSENGER JUST IN CASE
I know... I'll just mail you that
START TALKING
Okay.
I told you Petey's been meddling. He ha meddled in politics on Ystre before you got this ship
Schlock Mercenary

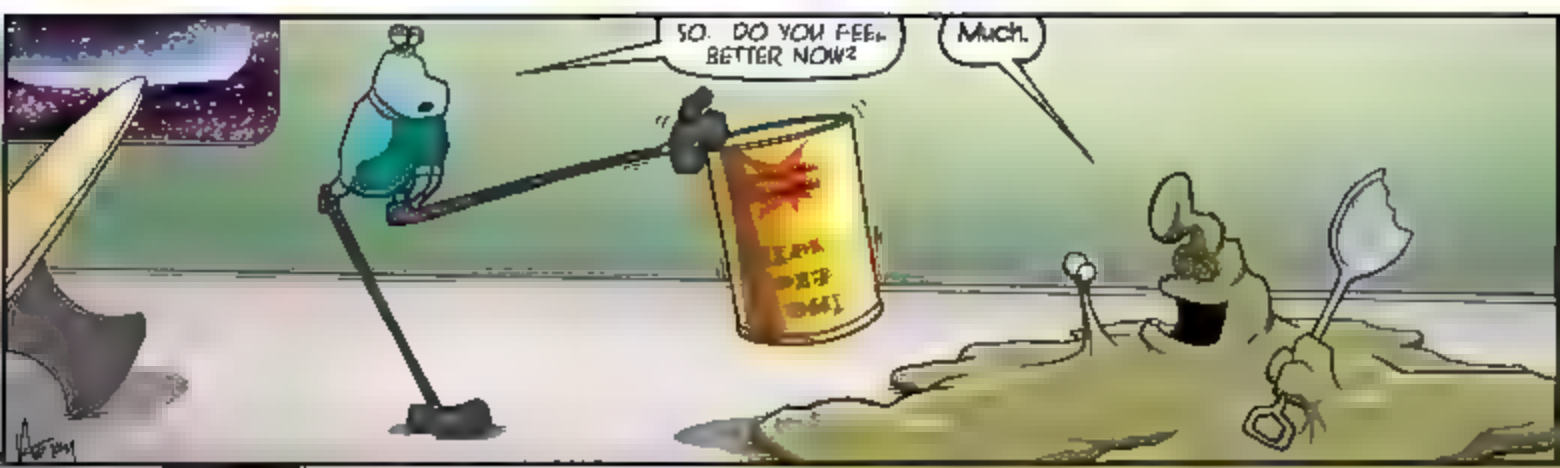
He said he bribed some senators and a judge. That's why mini-Schlock was granted that absurd salvage claim.
WHY WOULD PETEY DO THAT?
Maybe because he thought he owed you a ship? I don't know.
COMMANDER, WHAT'S YOUR OPINION ON THIS?
WELL, THERE'S NO NEED FOR US TO KEEP POINTING OUR WEAPONS AT POOR ENNESBY'S HEAD


Oh good I was starting to
BLAM
wom?
.. NOT WHEN WE CAN SHOOT HIS MOTIVATOR OUT FROM UNDER HIM.
WHY WOULD WE WANT TO DO THAT?
SO I CAN TAKE HIM APART OF COURSE
Great Bond over for the logic probe.


IN ONE OF THE FORWARD GALLEYS ABOARD OUR AS-YET-UNNAMED MERCENARY WARSHIP.
HOW ARE YOU FEELING, SARGE?
Dunno. Mostly I'm okay, I think.
MOSTLY?
I keep doing THIS, and creeping myself out.
IT'S CREEPING ME OUT


I remember Kevyn being the captain, and Tagon's Dad joining up for a couple of months.
And I remember Kevyn never being the captain, and me never meeting Tagon's Dad.
Every time I think about it, it's like the memories FIGHT with each other IF I had a head, the pain would be called a headache.
DOES THE OVALKWIK MAKE THE HEADACHES GO AWAY?
No. It just makes me happy enough not to care.


I HAD NO IDEA THAT OVALKWIK STUFF WAS SO POTENT
Mmmm... potent.
DOES IT WORK THAT WAY ON EVERYBODY?
Mmmm... maybe.
WEL... MAYBE I CAN TRY.
SOME?
Step away from the tub of happiness.


SO. DO YOU FEEL BETTER NOW?
Much.

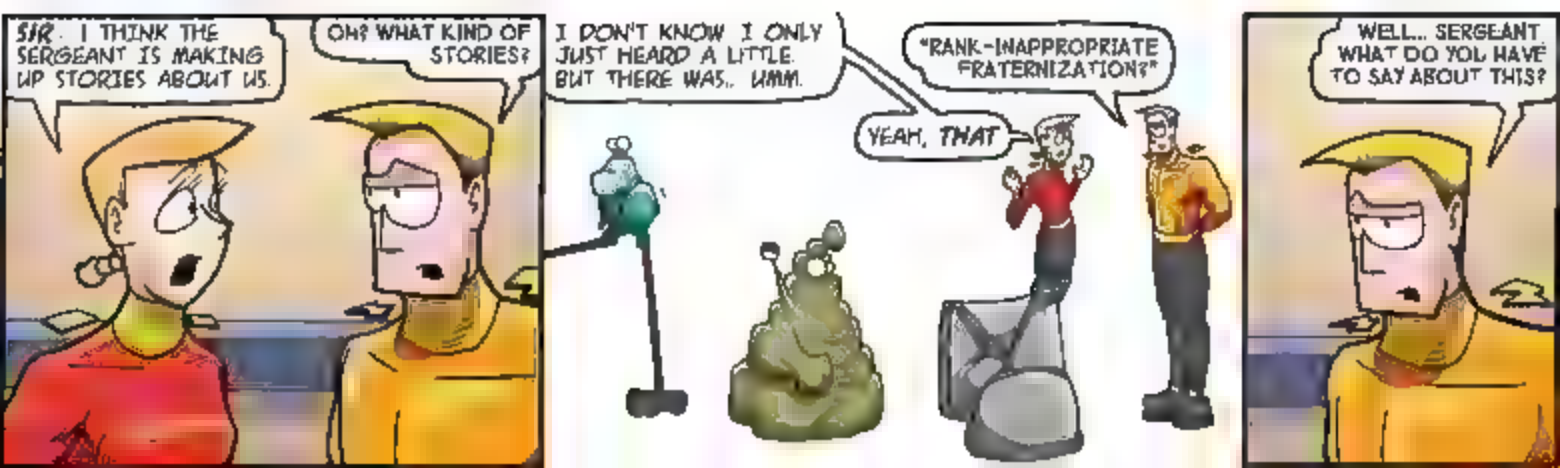
There's this one memory I just can't seem to place.
It feels like one of the very first things I can remember, but I can tell it's recent
We were in Phica's Fortress, right next to the teraport cage. I think I was in a cup or something.
Elf and the Captain were kissing each other like there was no tomorrow.

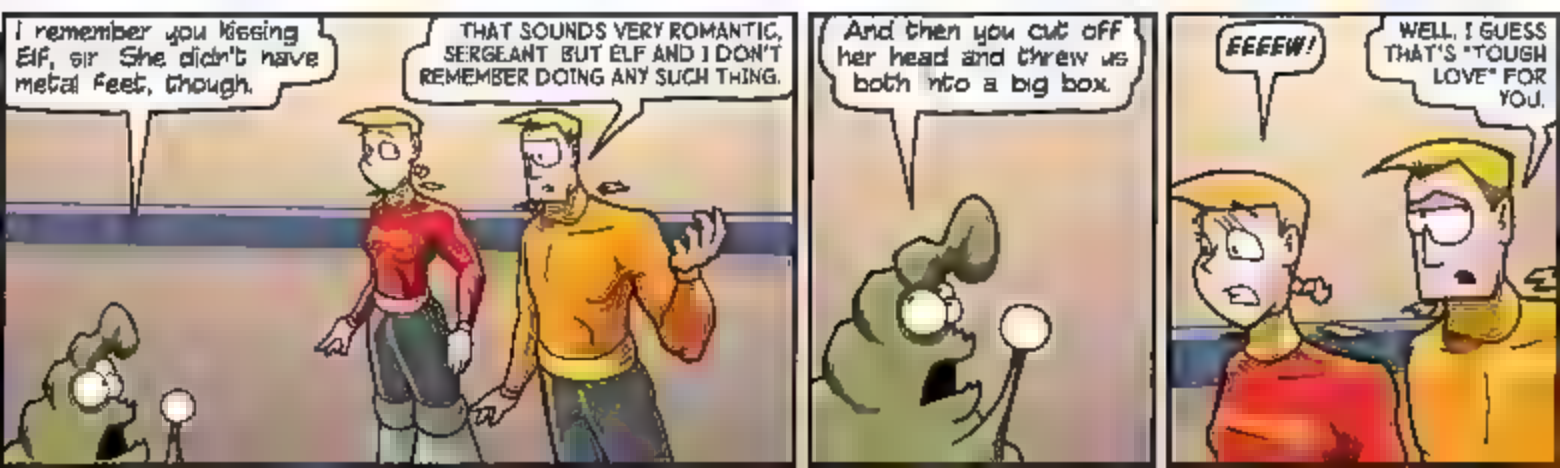
SERGEANT, WOULD YOU MIND REPEATING THAT? GO AHEAD AND START BACK AT THE BEGINNING.
Umm... errr - Repeating what?
WHATEVER IT WAS YOU WERE JUST NOW TALKING TO LEGS ABOUT
Oh. About the... umm... Ovalkwik?
NO, THE STORY ABOUT ME KISSING THE CAPTAIN
Err... hmm... right

SERGEANT SCHLOCK'S MEMORIES ARE JUMBLED TOGETHER WITH THE MEMORIES OF A TIME-TRAVELLING VERSION OF HIMSELF. HE REMEMBERS THINGS THAT NEVER HAPPENED, THAT MIGHT HAPPEN, AND THAT NEVER WILL HAPPEN, AND THEY ALL SEEM AS "REAL" AS HIS MEMORIES OF WHAT JUST HAPPENED.

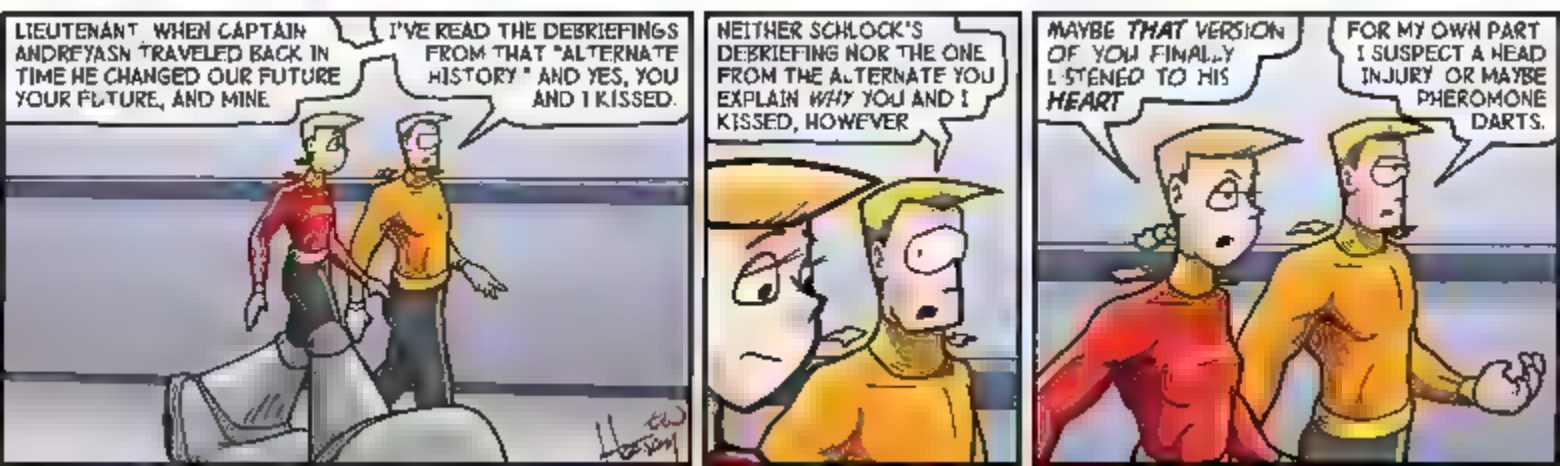
THIS WOULD BE FUNNIER FOR EVERYONE IF IT HADN'T BEEN THE PREMISE FOR A BAD 28TH-CENTURY SITCOM.

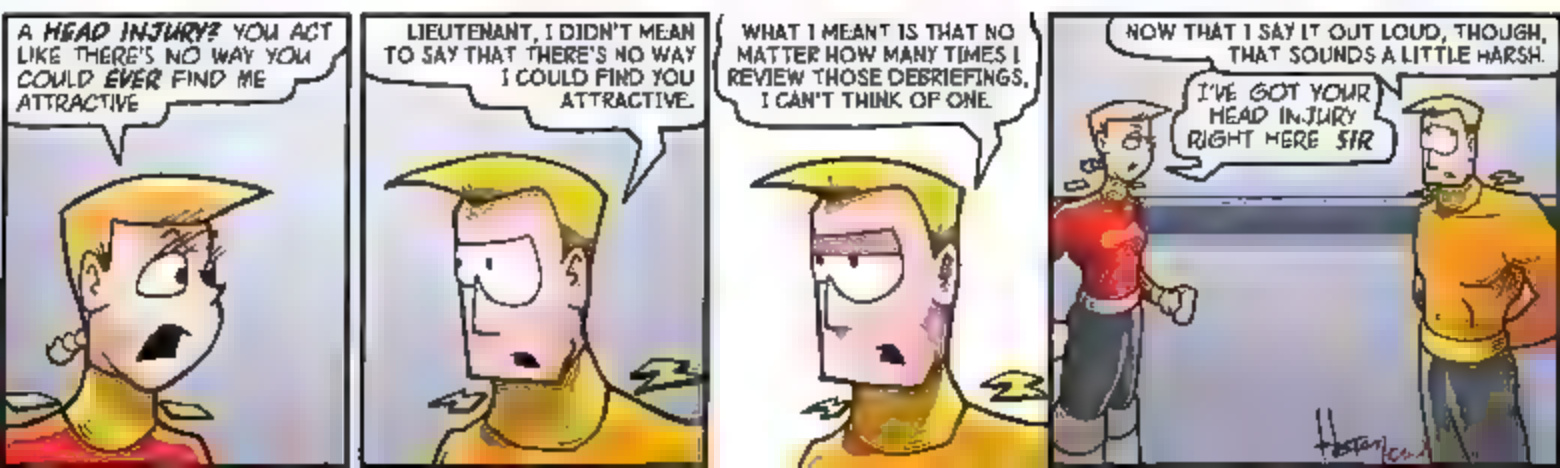
Schlock Mercenary


SIR. I THINK THE SERGEANT IS MAKING UP STORIES ABOUT US.
OH? WHAT KIND OF STORIES?
I DON'T KNOW. I ONLY JUST HEARD A LITTLE. BUT THERE WAS.. UMM.
"RANK-INAPPROPRIATE FRATERNIZATION?"
YEAH, THAT
WELL... SERGEANT, WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THIS?

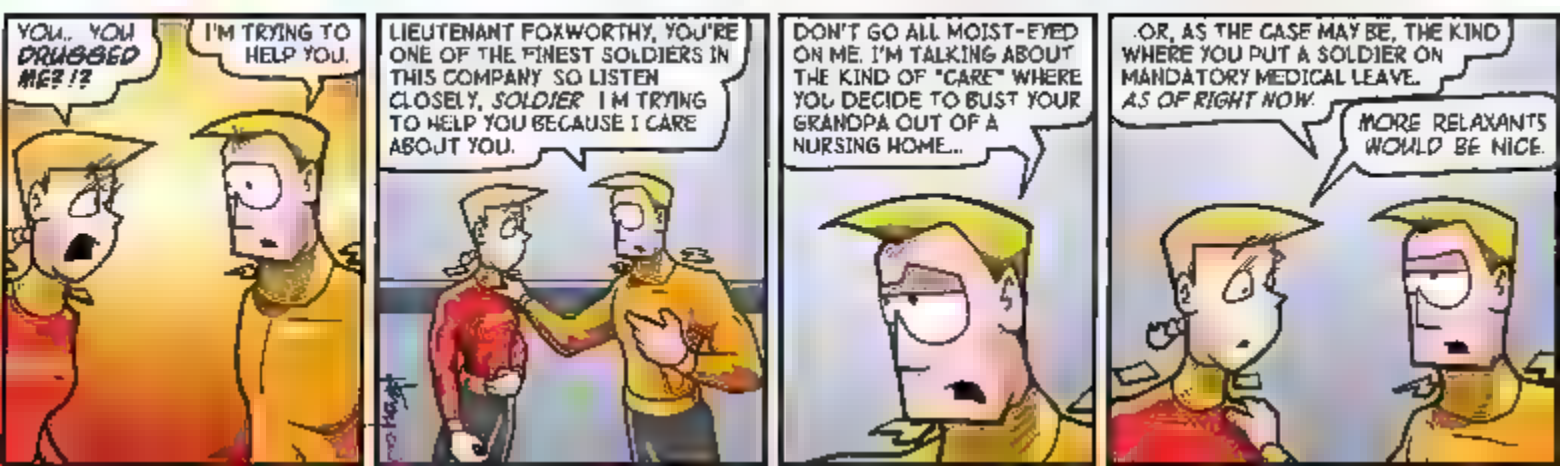

I remember you kissing Elf, sir. She didn't have metal feet, though.
THAT SOUNDS VERY ROMANTIC, SERGEANT. BUT ELF AND I DON'T REMEMBER DOING ANY SUCH THING.
And then you cut off her head and threw us both into a big box.
EEEEW!
WELL, I GUESS THAT'S "TOUGH LOVE" FOR YOU.

SERGEANT I WANT YOU TO THINK HARD ABOUT THIS..
WHO DEBRIEFED YOU AFTER YOU SAW ME CUT OFF ELF'S HEAD?
Commander... no, Captain Andreyash.
AND THAT MEANS WHAT YOU REMEMBER DIDN'T HAPPEN TO ELF HERE NOR TO ME.
NOW IF YOU'LL EXCUSE US, ELF AND I NEED TO DISCUSS "ALTERNATE HISTORY"
Oh boy! Can I...
ALONE

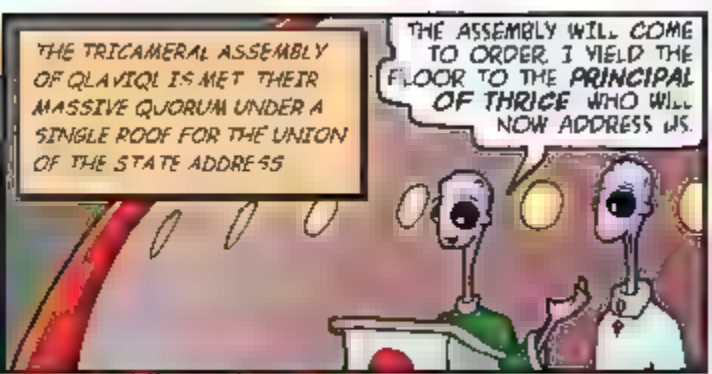

LIEUTENANT, WHEN CAPTAIN ANDREYASN TRAVELED BACK IN TIME HE CHANGED OUR FUTURE YOUR FUTURE, AND MINE.
I'VE READ THE DEBRIEFINGS FROM THAT "ALTERNATE HISTORY" AND YES, YOU AND I KISSED.
NEITHER SCHLOCK'S DEBRIEFING NOR THE ONE FROM THE ALTERNATE YOU EXPLAIN *WHY* YOU AND I KISSED, HOWEVER
MAYBE *THAT* VERSION OF YOU FINALLY LISTENED TO HIS *HEART*
FOR MY OWN PART I SUSPECT A HEAD INJURY OR MAYBE PHEROMONE DARTS.

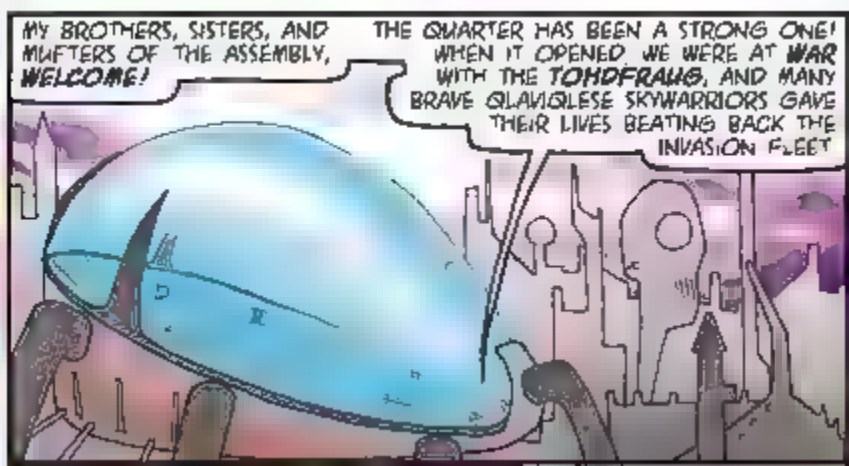

A HEAD INJURY? YOU ACT LIKE THERE'S NO WAY YOU COULD EVER FIND ME ATTRACTIVE
LIEUTENANT, I DIDN'T MEAN TO SAY THAT THERE'S NO WAY I COULD FIND YOU ATTRACTIVE.
WHAT I MEANT IS THAT NO MATTER HOW MANY TIMES I REVIEW THOSE DEBRIEFINGS, I CAN'T THINK OF ONE.
NOW THAT I SAY IT OUT LOUD, THOUGH, THAT SOUNDS A LITTLE HARSH.
I'VE GOT YOUR HEAD INJURY RIGHT HERE SIR

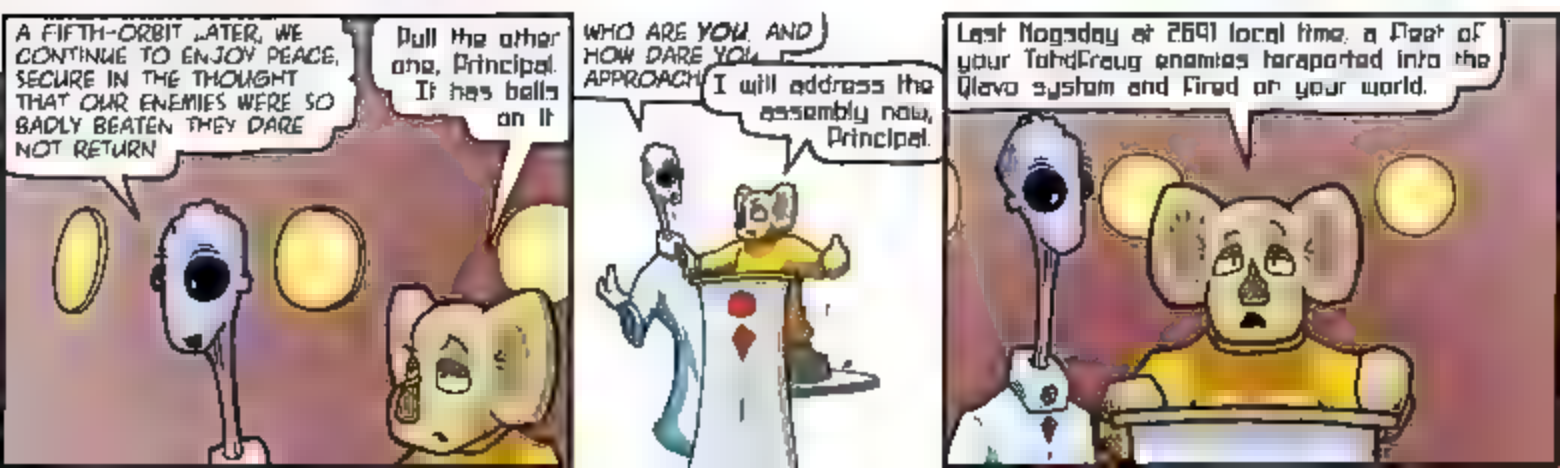
YOU KNOW WHAT I CAN'T FIGURE OUT? I CAN'T FIGURE OUT WHY I DIDN'T PUNCH YOUR LIGHTS OUT, JUST NOW, SIR.
I KNOW I WANTED TO. AND I'M PRETTY SURE I'M ABLE TO
THAT'S ACTUALLY WHY I WANTED TO TALK TO YOU IN THE FIRST PLACE.
CAPTAIN ANDREYASN'S NOTES SUGGESTED THAT YOU MIGHT HAVE BEEN ABUSING COMBAT STIMMIES
SO, THREE DAYS AGO I CUT YOUR STIMPAKS WITH RELAXANTS.
I WANT TO KILL YOU, BUT I FEEL ODDLY MELLOW.

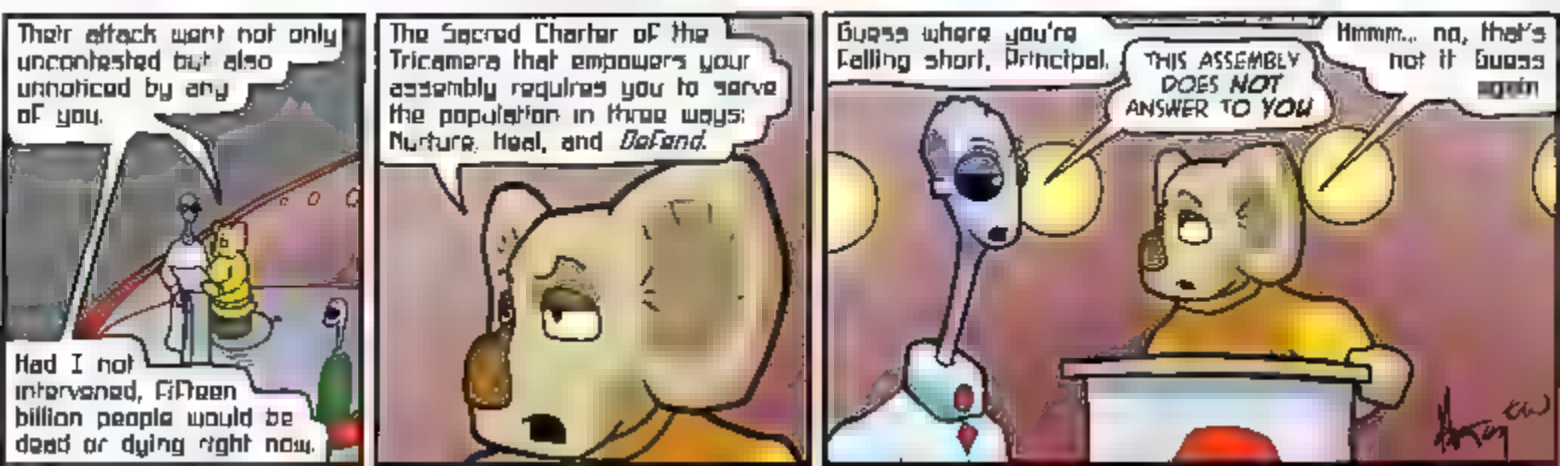

YOU... YOU DRUGGED ME?!?
I'M TRYING TO HELP YOU.
LIEUTENANT FOXWORTHY, YOU'RE ONE OF THE FINEST SOLDIERS IN THIS COMPANY SO LISTEN CLOSELY, SOLDIER I'M TRYING TO HELP YOU BECAUSE I CARE ABOUT YOU.
DON'T GO ALL MOIST-EYED ON ME. I'M TALKING ABOUT THE KIND OF "CARE" WHERE YOU DECIDE TO BUST YOUR GRANDPA OUT OF A NURSING HOME...
...OR, AS THE CASE MAY BE, THE KIND WHERE YOU PUT A SOLDIER ON MANDATORY MEDICAL LEAVE. AS OF RIGHT NOW.
MORE RELAXANTS WOULD BE NICE.

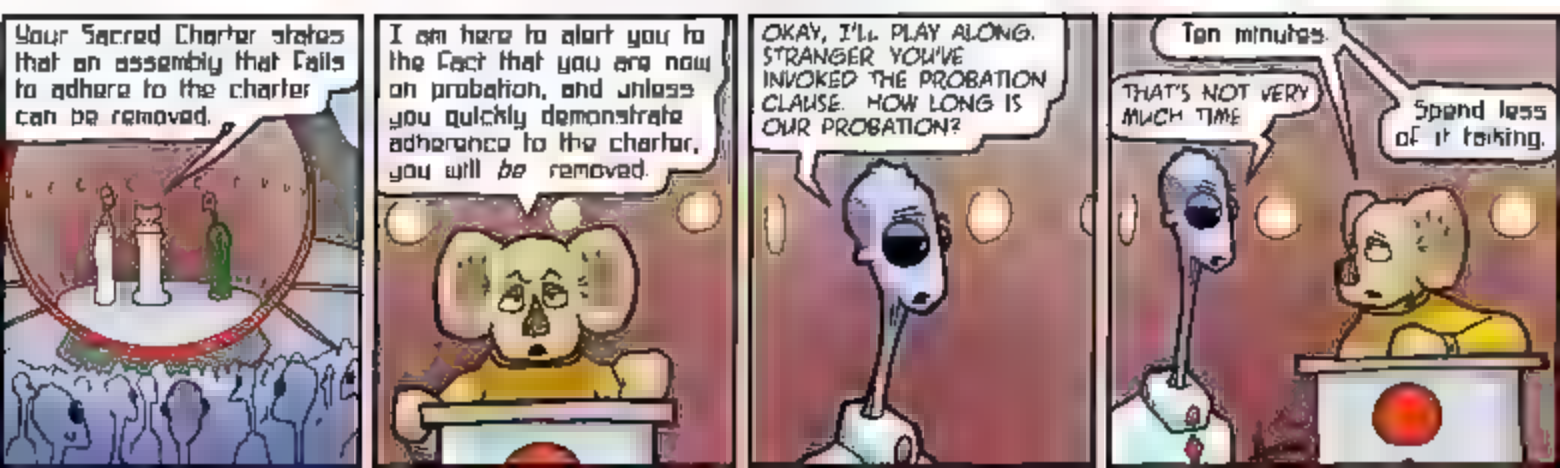
IN ORBIT ABOVE MAHUITA, OTU.
SQUAD, TEN-HUT!
UH OH SOUNDS OFFICIAL
PUT A CORK IN THAT SOLDIER UNLESS YOU WANT ME TO DO IT FOR YOU
YOUR COMMANDING OFFICER, LIEUTENANT FOXWORTHY, HAS JUST BEEN PLACED ON MEDICAL LEAVE
WHEN THE REST OF THE COMPANY JOINS US, YOU WILL ATTACH YOURSELVES TO LIEUTENANT COMMANDER JOHN DER TRIHS.
Um?
FIGURATIVELY SPEAKING, OF COURSE
Oh, good.


THE TRICAMERAL ASSEMBLY OF QLAVIQL IS MET THEIR MASSIVE QUORUM UNDER A SINGLE ROOF FOR THE UNION OF THE STATE ADDRESS
THE ASSEMBLY WILL COME TO ORDER. I YIELD THE FLOOR TO THE PRINCIPAL OF THRICE WHO WILL NOW ADDRESS US.
Schlock Mercenary

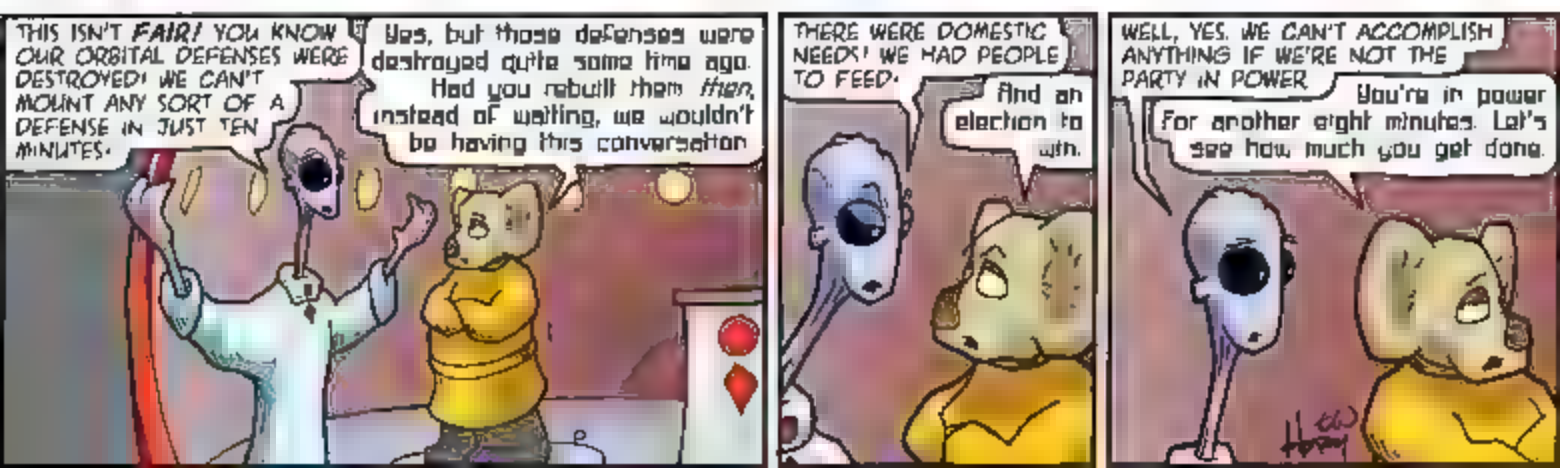

MY BROTHERS, SISTERS, AND MUFTERS OF THE ASSEMBLY, WELCOME!
THE QUARTER HAS BEEN A STRONG ONE! WHEN IT OPENED, WE WERE AT WAR WITH THE TOHDFRAUS, AND MANY BRAVE QLAVIQLESE SKYWARRIORS GAVE THEIR LIVES BEATING BACK THE INVASION FLEET

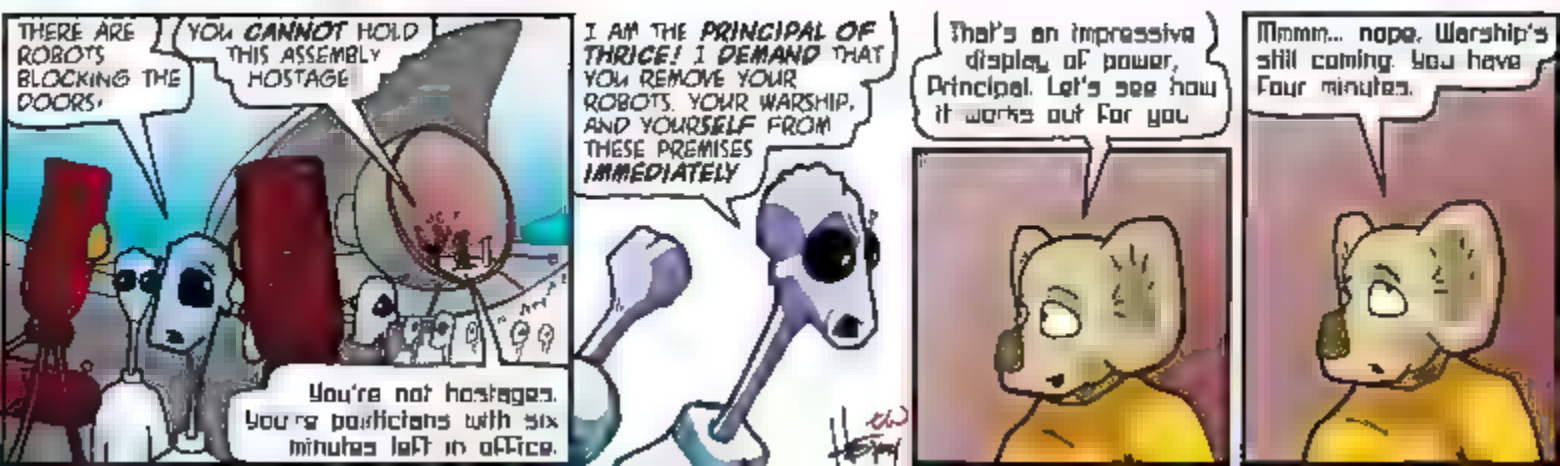

A FIFTH-ORBIT LATER, WE CONTINUE TO ENJOY PEACE, SECURE IN THE THOUGHT THAT OUR ENEMIES WERE SO BADLY BEATEN THEY DARE NOT RETURN
Pull the other one, Principal. It has bells on it
WHO ARE YOU, AND HOW DARE YOU APPROACH
I will address the assembly now, Principal.
Last Nogsday at 2691 local time, a fleet of your TohdFreug enemies teraported into the Qlavo system and fired on your world.

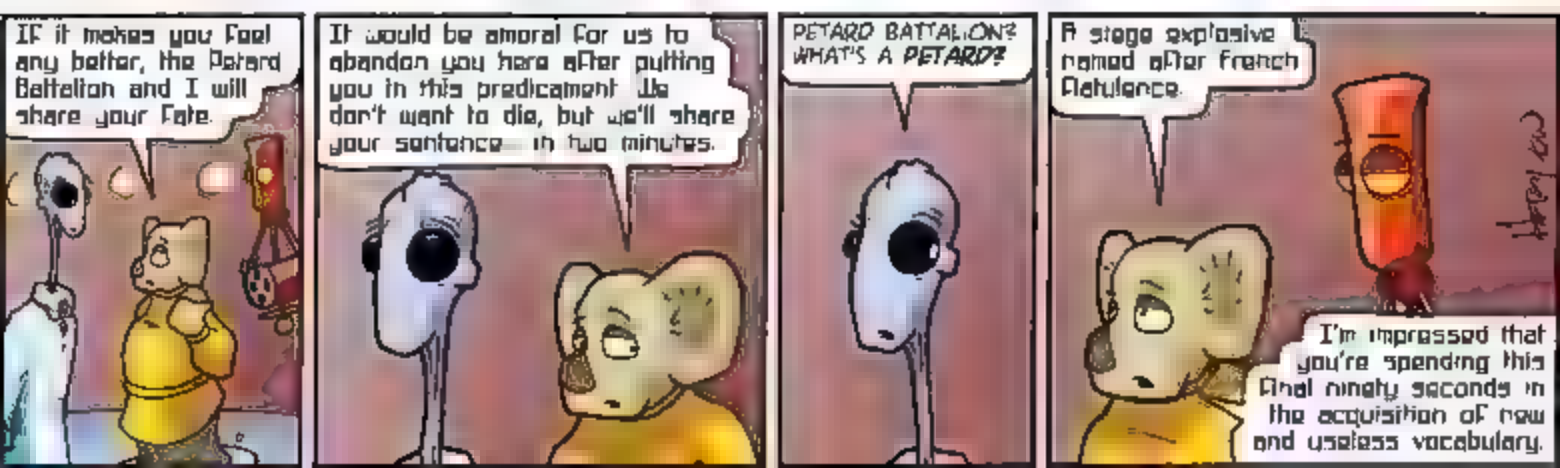

Their attack went not only uncontested but also unnoticed by any of you.
Had I not intervened, fifteen billion people would be dead or dying right now.
The Sacred Charter of the Tricamera that empowers your assembly requires you to serve the population in three ways: Nurture, Heal, and *Defend*.
Guess where you're falling short, Principal.
THIS ASSEMBLY DOES NOT ANSWER TO YOU
Hmmm... no, that's not it. Guess again


Your Sacred Charter states that an assembly that fails to adhere to the charter can be removed.
I am here to alert you to the fact that you are now on probation, and unless you quickly demonstrate adherence to the charter, you will *be* removed.
OKAY, I'LL PLAY ALONG. STRANGER YOU'VE INVOKED THE PROBATION CLAUSE. HOW LONG IS OUR PROBATION?
Ten minutes.
THAT'S NOT VERY MUCH TIME
Spend less of it talking.

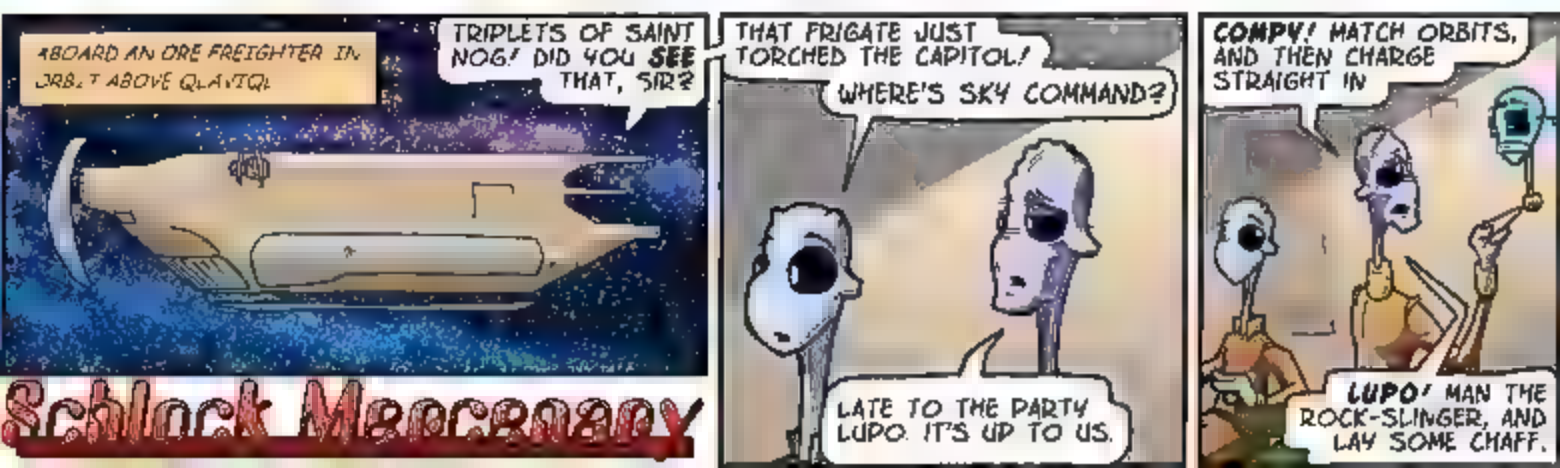
The terms of your probation are simple. You must demonstrate the ability to defend the surface of this planet.
A Frigate armed with light shields and a Fury operational plasma lance just entered orbit. All you need to do is shoot it down.
In ten minutes it will be overhead, at which point it will destroy this building and any who remain inside.
Hmmm... You all seem ready to try to escape the building rather than defend it. I believe your probation is off to a rocky start.

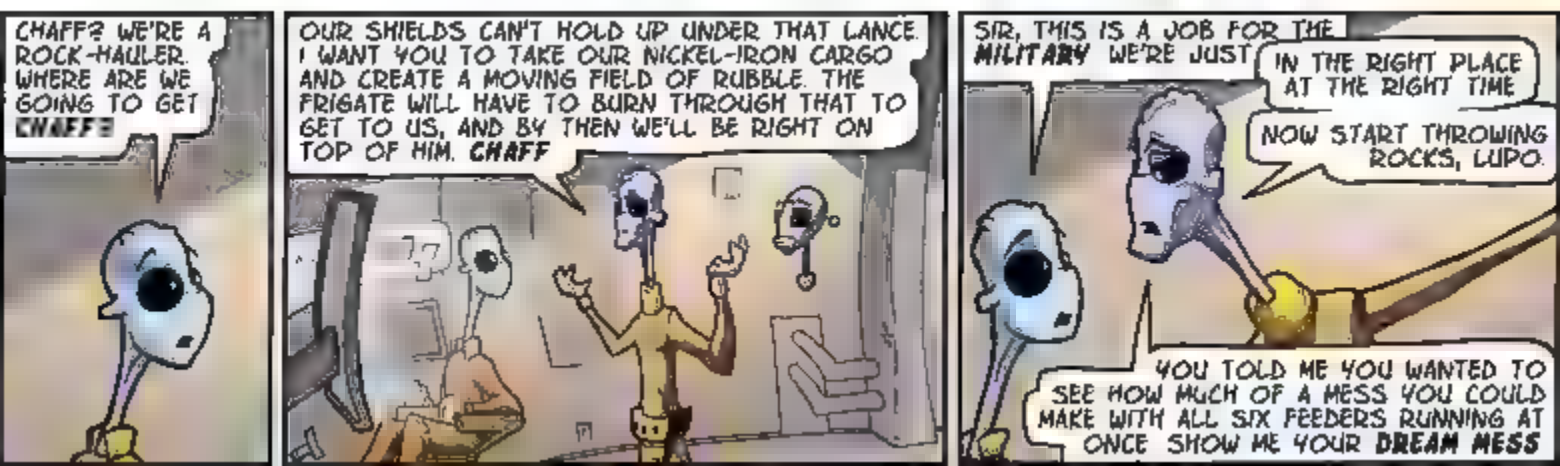

THIS ISN'T FAIR! YOU KNOW OUR ORBITAL DEFENSES WERE DESTROYED! WE CAN'T MOUNT ANY SORT OF A DEFENSE IN JUST TEN MINUTES.
Yes, but those defenses were destroyed quite some time ago. Had you rebuilt them then, instead of waiting, we wouldn't be having this conversation.
THERE WERE DOMESTIC NEEDS! WE HAD PEOPLE TO FEED.
And an election to win.
WELL, YES. WE CAN'T ACCOMPLISH ANYTHING IF WE'RE NOT THE PARTY IN POWER.
You're in power for another eight minutes. Let's see how much you get done.

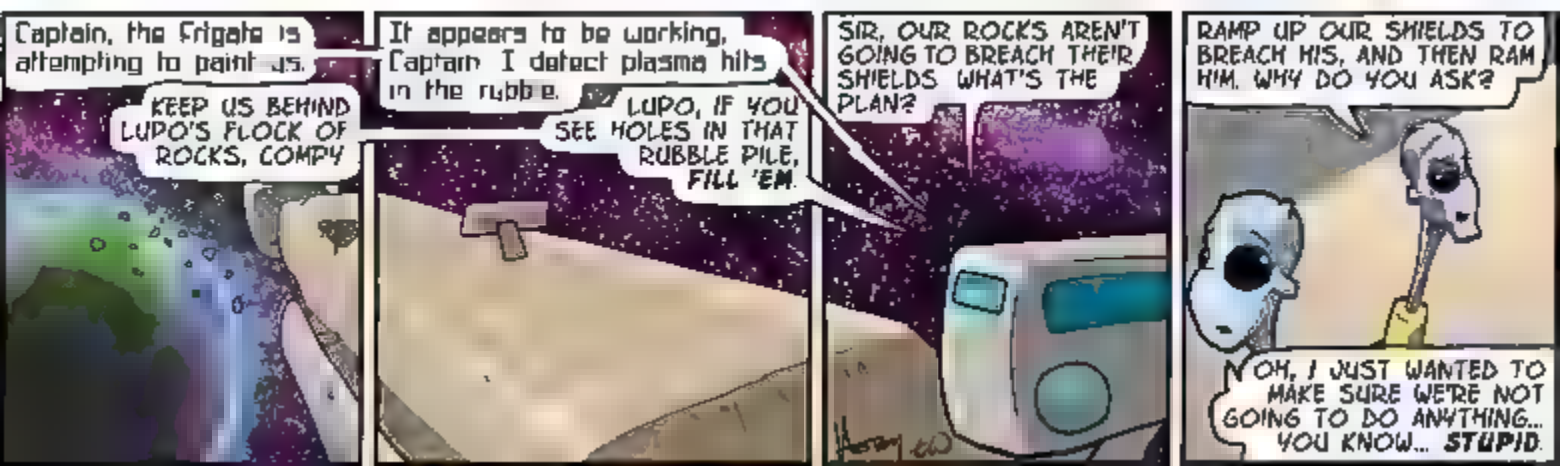

THERE ARE ROBOTS BLOCKING THE DOORS.
YOU CANNOT HOLD THIS ASSEMBLY HOSTAGE
You're not hostages. You're politicians with six minutes left in office.
I AM THE PRINCIPAL OF THRICE! I DEMAND THAT YOU REMOVE YOUR ROBOTS, YOUR WARSHIP, AND YOURSELF FROM THESE PREMISES IMMEDIATELY
That's an impressive display of power, Principal. Let's see how it works out for you.
Mmmm... nope. Warship's still coming. You have four minutes.

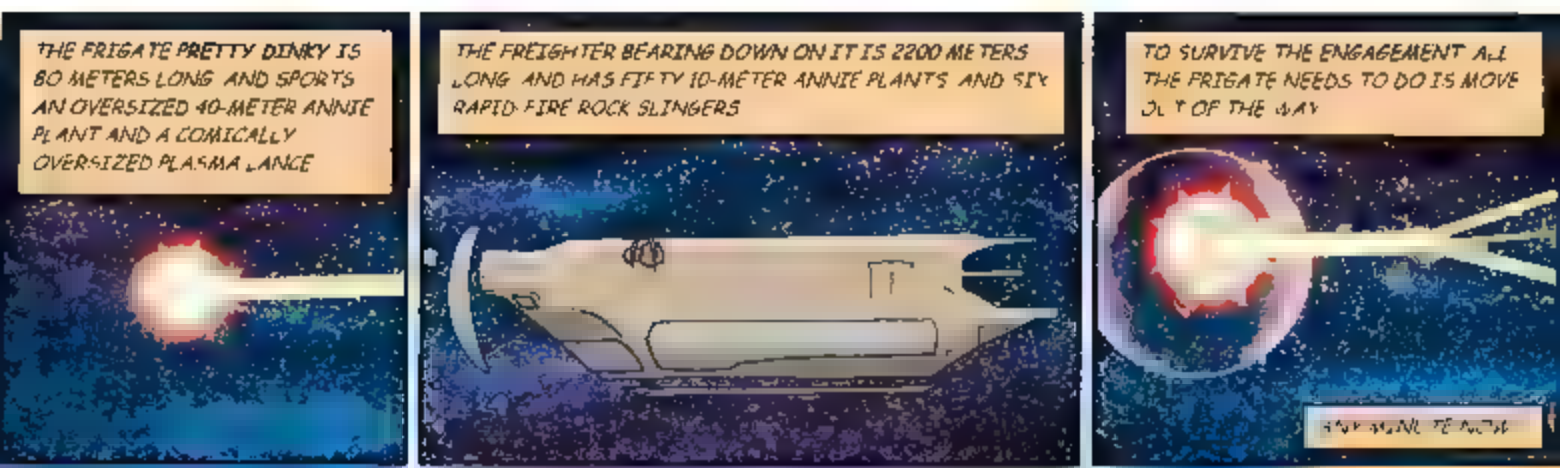

If it makes you feel any better, the Petard Battalion and I will share your fate.
It would be amoral for us to abandon you here after putting you in this predicament. We don't want to die, but we'll share your sentence in two minutes.
PETARD BATTALION? WHAT'S A PETARD?
A stage explosive named after French flatulence.
I'm impressed that you're spending this final ninety seconds in the acquisition of new and useless vocabulary.

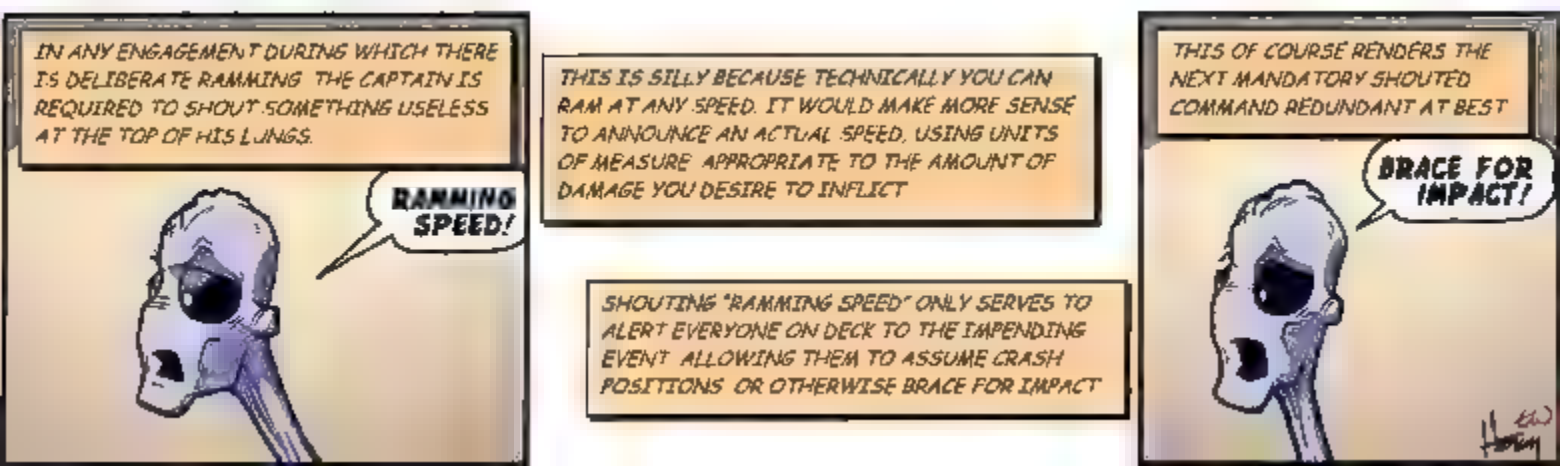
THE FRIGATE IN ORBIT LOOKS COMICAL TOWING A WEAPON THREE TIMES ITS SIZE
THERE'S NOTHING COMICAL ABOUT WHAT IT DOES THOUGH THE LANCE OF PLASMA DESTROYS THE TRICAMERAL ASSEMBLY WITH PRECISION LIKE A MEDIBOT REMOVING A TUMOR
MOST POLITICIANS ARE UNCOMFORTABLE BEING COMPARED TO TUMORS THE TUMORS HOWEVER ARE GETTING THE SHORT END OF THE STICK

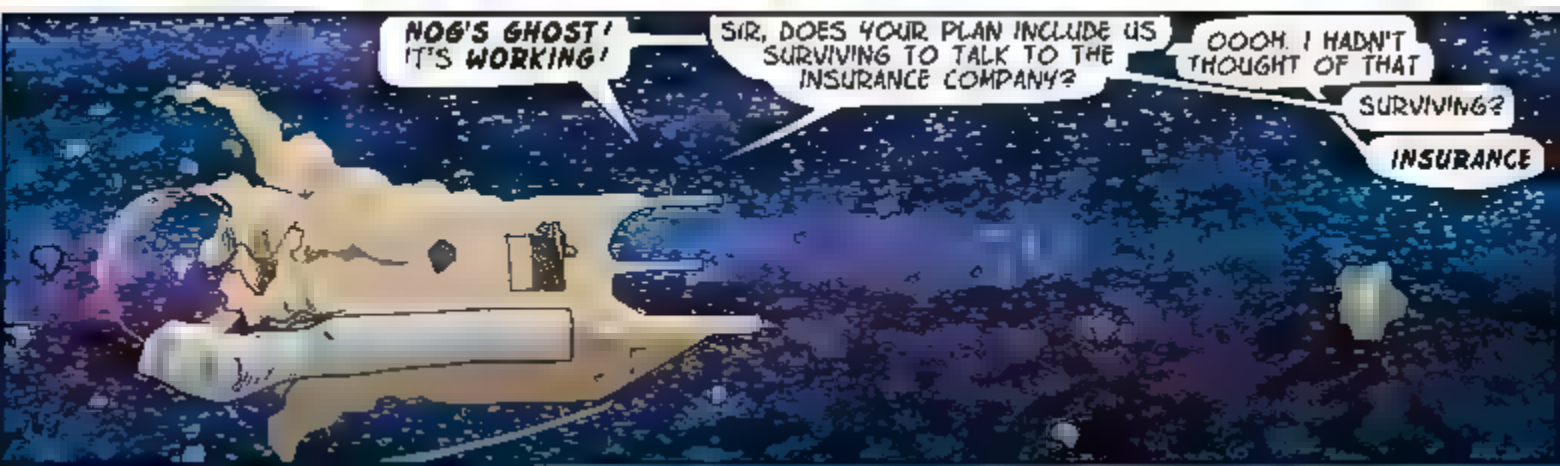

ABOARD AN ORE FREIGHTER IN ORBIT ABOVE QLANTQL
TRIPLETS OF SAINT NOG! DID YOU SEE THAT, SIR?
Schlock Mercenary
THAT FRIGATE JUST TORCHED THE CAPITOL!
WHERE'S SKY COMMAND?
LATE TO THE PARTY LUPO. IT'S UP TO US.
COMPY! MATCH ORBITS, AND THEN CHARGE STRAIGHT IN
LUPO! MAN THE ROCK-SLINGER, AND LAY SOME CHAFF.

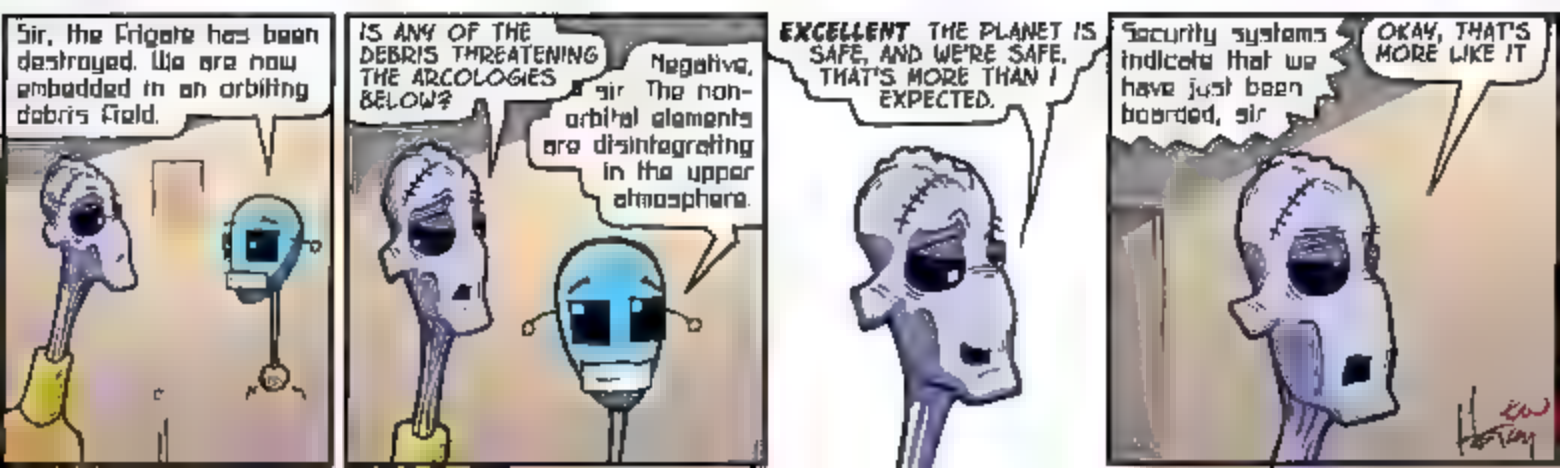

CHAFF? WE'RE A ROCK-HAULER. WHERE ARE WE GOING TO GET CHAFF?
OUR SHIELDS CAN'T HOLD UP UNDER THAT LANCE. I WANT YOU TO TAKE OUR NICKEL-IRON CARGO AND CREATE A MOVING FIELD OF RUBBLE. THE FRIGATE WILL HAVE TO BURN THROUGH THAT TO GET TO US, AND BY THEN WE'LL BE RIGHT ON TOP OF HIM. CHAFF
SIR, THIS IS A JOB FOR THE MILITARY WE'RE JUST
IN THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME
NOW START THROWING ROCKS, LUPO.
YOU TOLD ME YOU WANTED TO SEE HOW MUCH OF A MESS YOU COULD MAKE WITH ALL SIX FEEDERS RUNNING AT ONCE. SHOW ME YOUR DREAM MESS

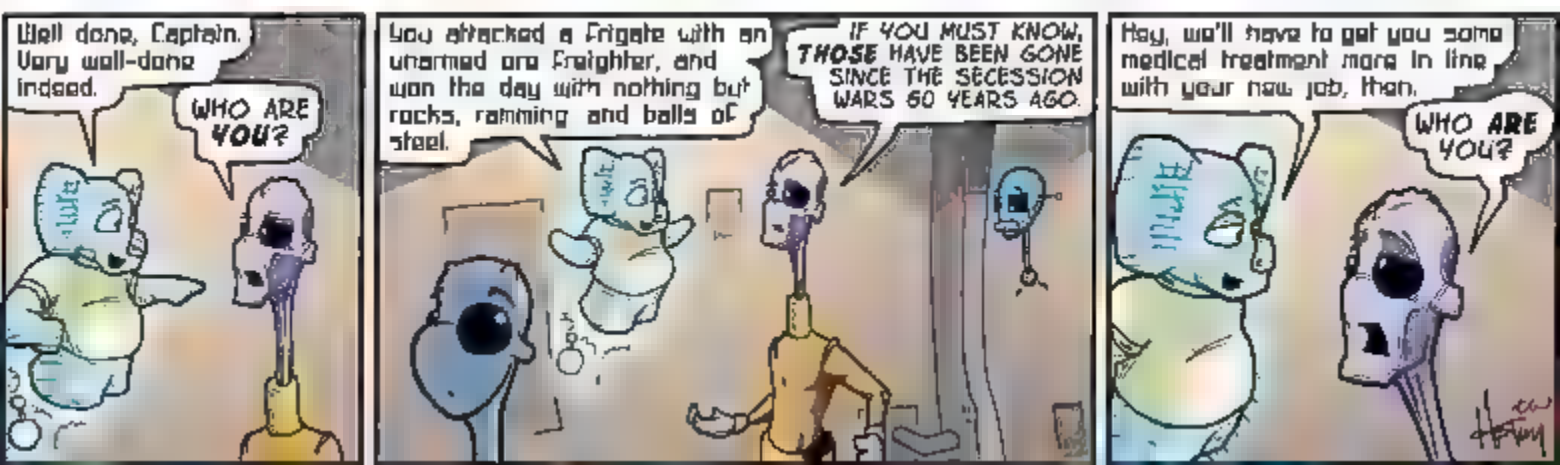

Captain, the Frigate is attempting to paint us.
KEEP US BEHIND LUPO'S FLOCK OF ROCKS, COMPY
It appears to be working, Captain. I detect plasma hits in the rubble.
LUPO, IF YOU SEE HOLES IN THAT RUBBLE PILE, FILL 'EM.
SIR, OUR ROCKS AREN'T GOING TO BREACH THEIR SHIELDS. WHAT'S THE PLAN?
RAMP UP OUR SHIELDS TO BREACH HIS, AND THEN RAM HIM. WHY DO YOU ASK?
OH, I JUST WANTED TO MAKE SURE WE'RE NOT GOING TO DO ANYTHING... YOU KNOW... STUPID.

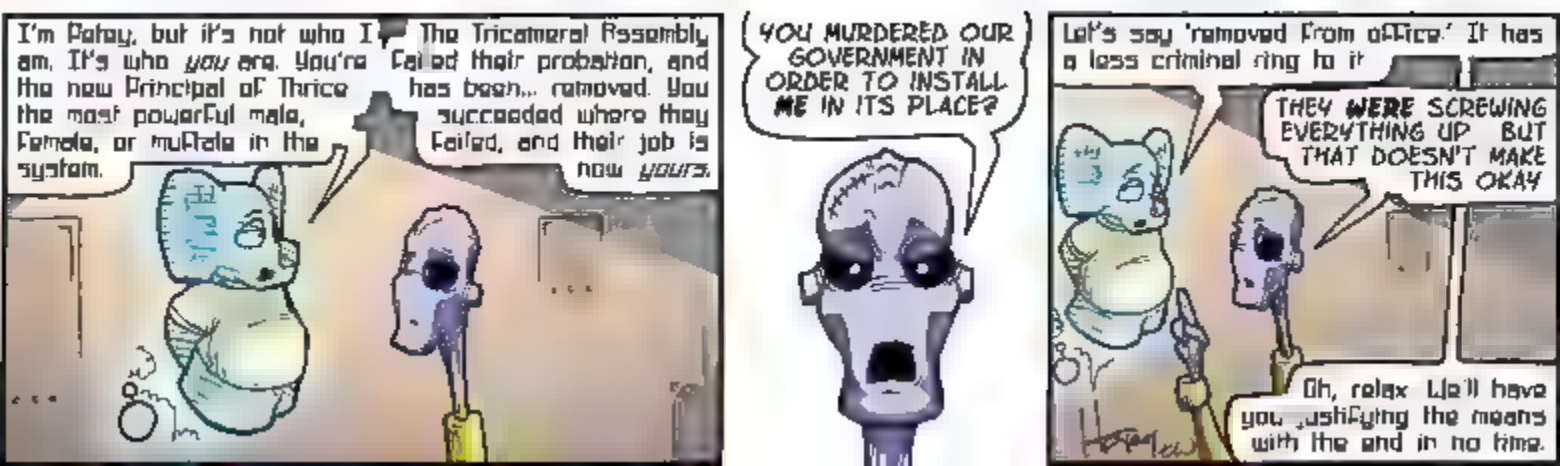

THE FRIGATE PRETTY DINKY IS 80 METERS LONG AND SPORTS AN OVERSIZED 40-METER ANNIE PLANT AND A COMICALLY OVERSIZED PLASMA LANCE
THE FREIGHTER BEARING DOWN ON IT IS 2200 METERS LONG AND HAS FIFTY 10-METER ANNIE PLANTS AND SIX RAPID-FIRE ROCK SLINGERS
TO SURVIVE THE ENGAGEMENT ALL THE FRIGATE NEEDS TO DO IS MOVE OUT OF THE WAY

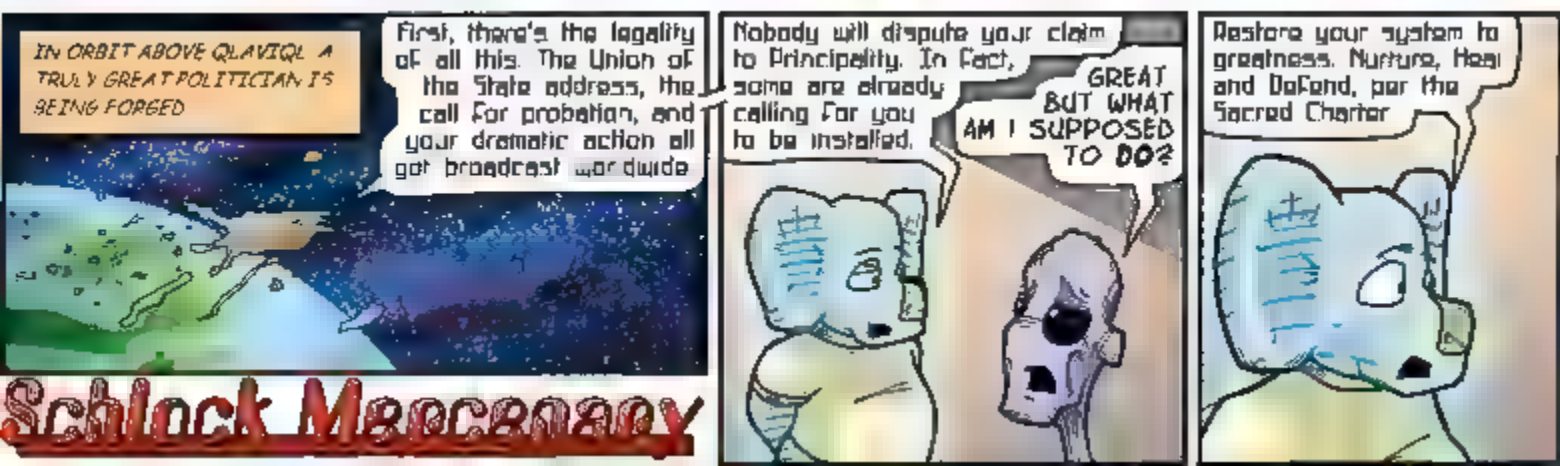

IN ANY ENGAGEMENT DURING WHICH THERE IS DELIBERATE RAMMING THE CAPTAIN IS REQUIRED TO SHOUT SOMETHING USELESS AT THE TOP OF HIS LUNGS.
RAMMING SPEED!
THIS IS SILLY BECAUSE TECHNICALLY YOU CAN RAM AT ANY SPEED. IT WOULD MAKE MORE SENSE TO ANNOUNCE AN ACTUAL SPEED, USING UNITS OF MEASURE APPROPRIATE TO THE AMOUNT OF DAMAGE YOU DESIRE TO INFLICT
SHOUTING "RAMMING SPEED" ONLY SERVES TO ALERT EVERYONE ON DECK TO THE IMPENDING EVENT ALLOWING THEM TO ASSUME CRASH POSITIONS OR OTHERWISE BRACE FOR IMPACT
THIS OF COURSE RENDERS THE NEXT MANDATORY SHOUTED COMMAND REDUNDANT AT BEST
BRACE FOR IMPACT!

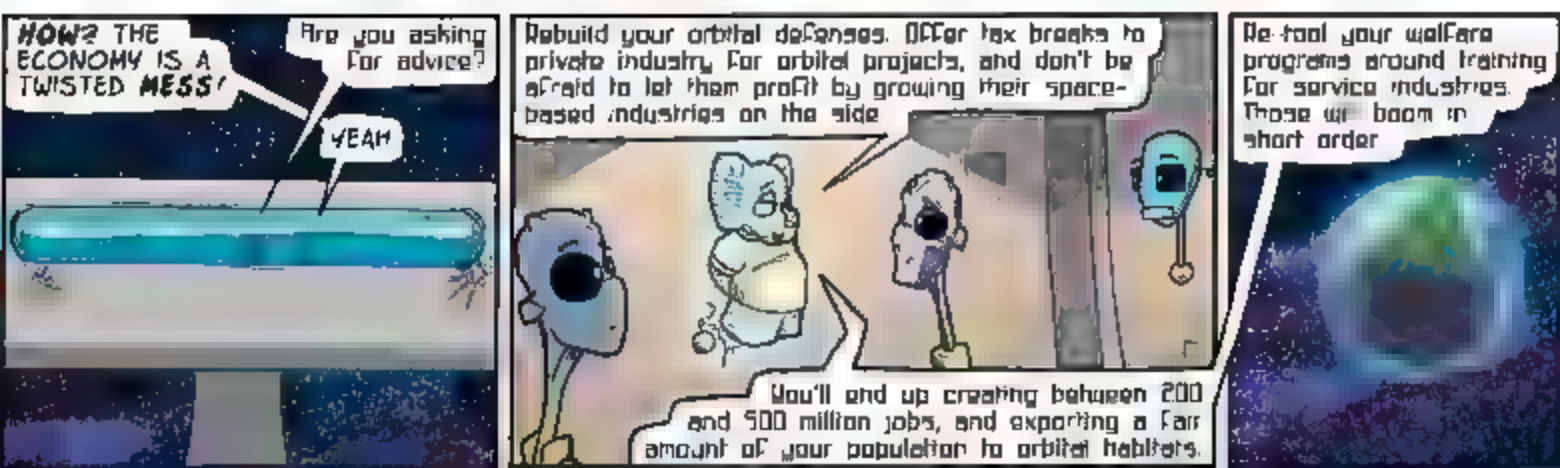

NOG'S GHOST! IT'S WORKING!
SIR, DOES YOUR PLAN INCLUDE US SURVIVING TO TALK TO THE INSURANCE COMPANY?
OOOH. I HADN'T THOUGHT OF THAT
SURVIVING?
INSURANCE

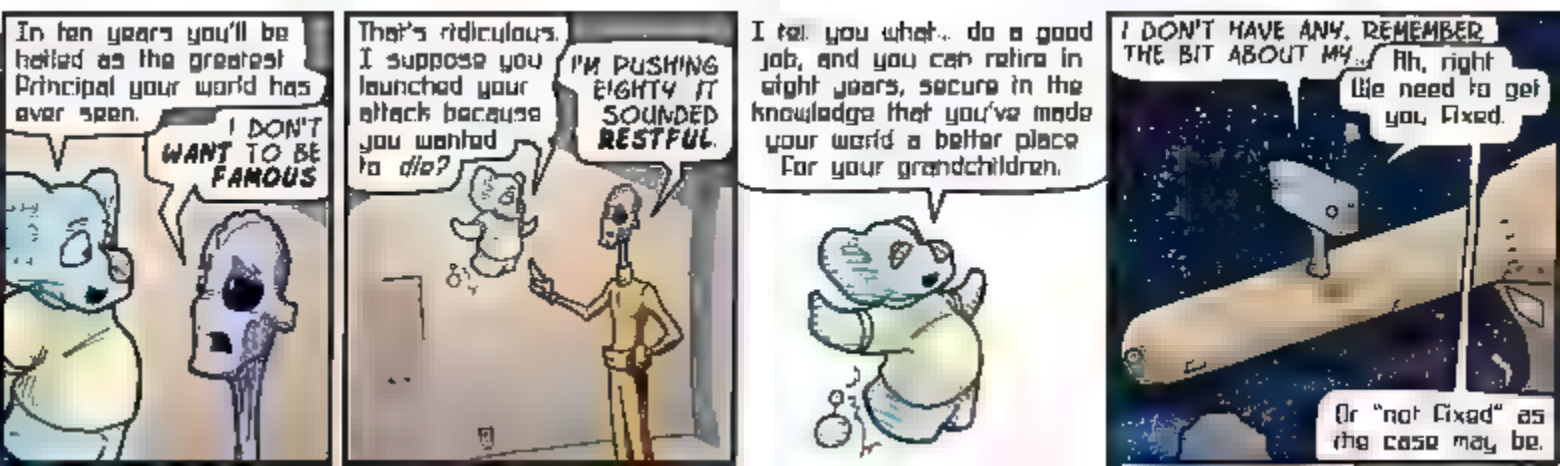

Sir, the Frigate has been destroyed. We are now embedded in an orbiting debris field.
IS ANY OF THE DEBRIS THREATENING THE ARCOLOGIES BELOW?
Negative, sir. The non-orbital elements are disintegrating in the upper atmosphere.
EXCELLENT. THE PLANET IS SAFE, AND WE'RE SAFE. THAT'S MORE THAN I EXPECTED.
Security systems indicate that we have just been boarded, sir.
OKAY, THAT'S MORE LIKE IT

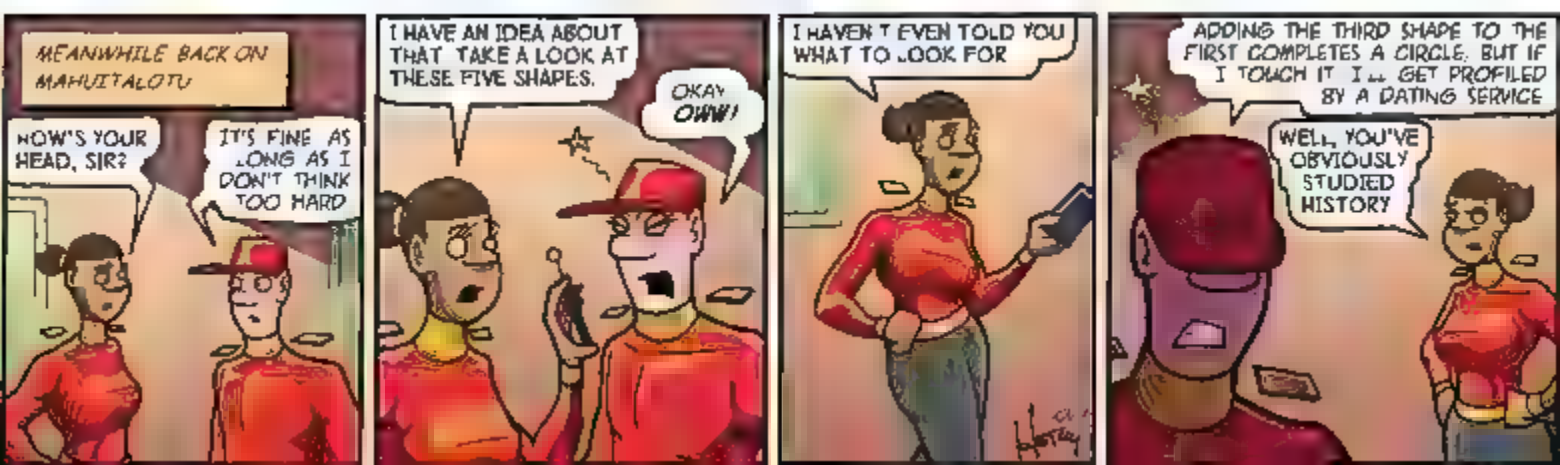

Well done, Captain. Very well-done indeed.
WHO ARE YOU?
You attacked a Frigate with an unarmed ore freighter, and won the day with nothing but rocks, ramming and balls of steel.
IF YOU MUST KNOW, THOSE HAVE BEEN GONE SINCE THE SECESSION WARS 60 YEARS AGO.
Hey, we'll have to get you some medical treatment more in line with your new job, than.
WHO ARE YOU?


I'm Patay, but it's not who I am. It's who *you* are. You're the new Principal of Thrice the most powerful male, female, or muffale in the system.
The Tricameral Assembly failed their probation, and has been... removed. You succeeded where they failed, and their job is now *yours*.
YOU MURDERED OUR GOVERNMENT IN ORDER TO INSTALL ME IN ITS PLACE?
Let's say 'removed from office.' It has a less criminal ring to it.
THEY WERE SCREWING EVERYTHING UP. BUT THAT DOESN'T MAKE THIS OKAY.
Oh, relax. We'll have you justifying the means with the end in no time.

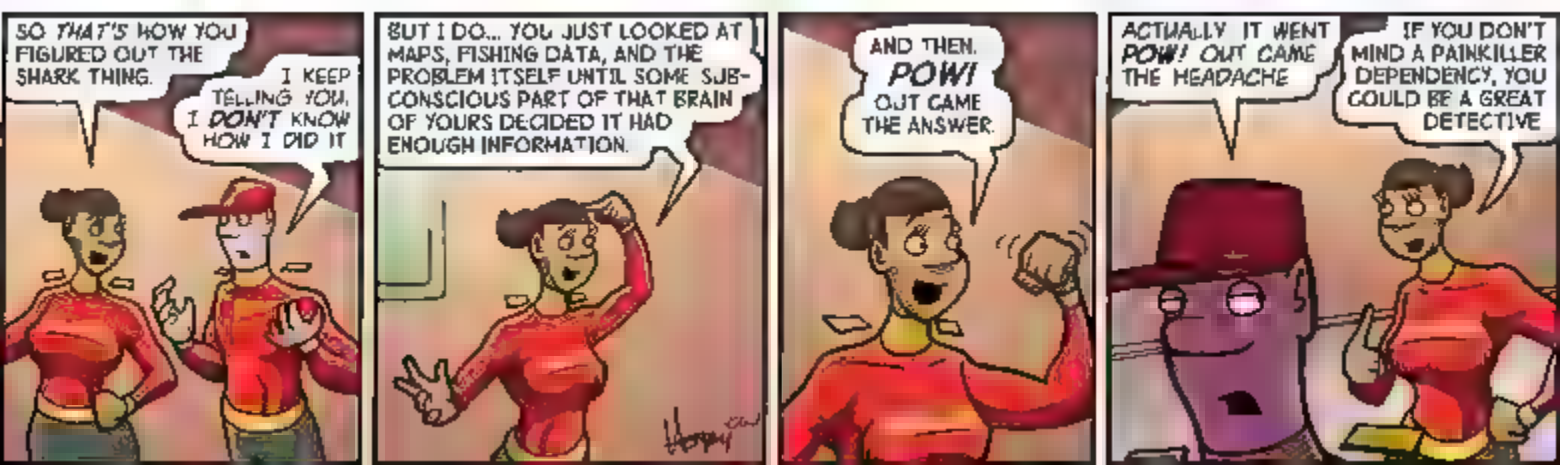

IN ORBIT ABOVE QLAVIQL A TRULY GREAT POLITICIAN IS BEING FORGED
First, there's the legality of all this. The Union of the State address, the call for probation, and your dramatic action all got broadcast worldwide
Nobody will dispute your claim to Principality. In fact, some are already calling for you to be installed.
GREAT BUT WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO?
Restore your system to greatness. Nurture, Heal and Defend, per the Sacred Charter
Schlock Mercenary


HOW? THE ECONOMY IS A TWISTED MESS!
Are you asking for advice?
YEAH
Rebuild your orbital defenses. Offer tax breaks to private industry for orbital projects, and don't be afraid to let them profit by growing their space-based industries on the side.
You'll end up creating between 200 and 500 million jobs, and exporting a fair amount of your population to orbital habitats.
Re-tool your welfare programs around training for service industries. Those will boom in short order.

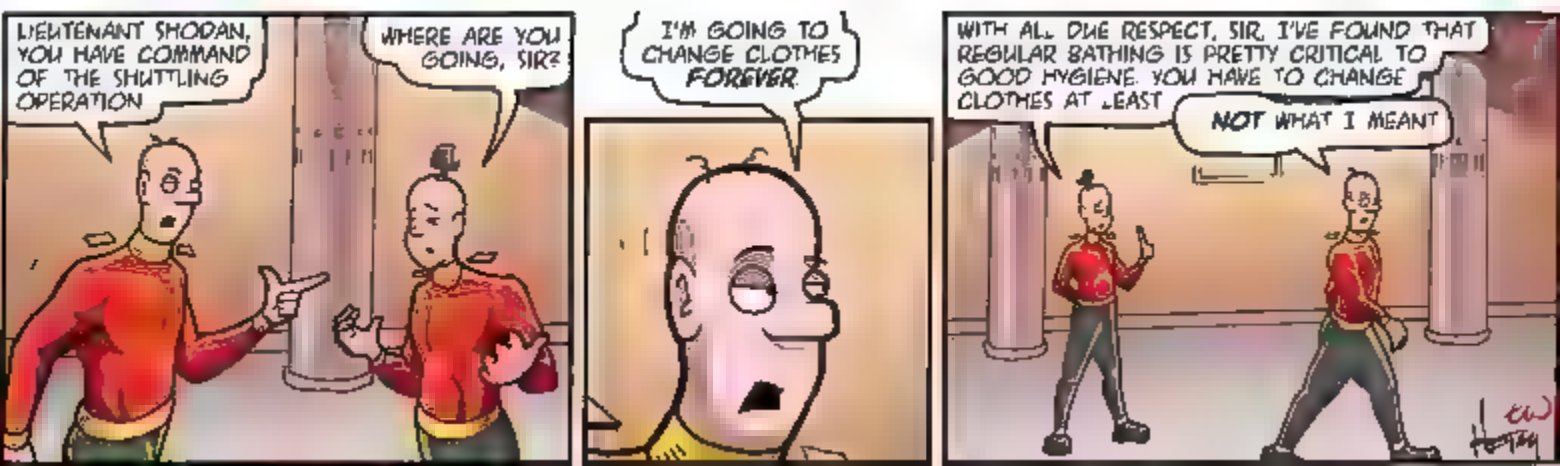

In ten years you'll be hailed as the greatest Principal your world has ever seen.
I DON'T WANT TO BE FAMOUS
That's ridiculous. I suppose you launched your attack because you wanted to die?
I'M PUSHING EIGHTY. IT SOUNDED RESTFUL.
I tell you what... do a good job, and you can retire in eight years, secure in the knowledge that you've made your world a better place for your grandchildren.
I DON'T HAVE ANY. REMEMBER THE BIT ABOUT MY...
Ah, right. We need to get you fixed.
Or "not fixed" as the case may be.

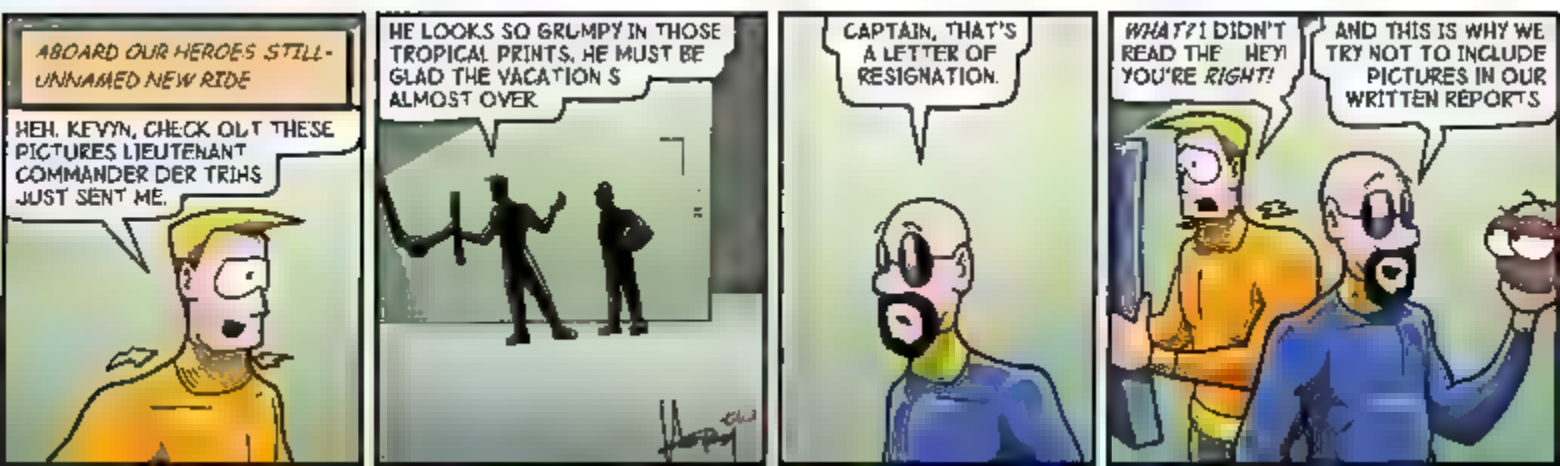

MEANWHILE BACK ON MAHUITALOTU
HOW'S YOUR HEAD, SIR?
IT'S FINE AS LONG AS I DON'T THINK TOO HARD
I HAVE AN IDEA ABOUT THAT TAKE A LOOK AT THESE FIVE SHAPES.
OKAY OWW!
I HAVEN'T EVEN TOLD YOU WHAT TO LOOK FOR
ADDING THE THIRD SHAPE TO THE FIRST COMPLETES A CIRCLE. BUT IF I TOUCH IT I'LL GET PROFILED BY A DATING SERVICE
WELL, YOU'VE OBVIOUSLY STUDIED HISTORY

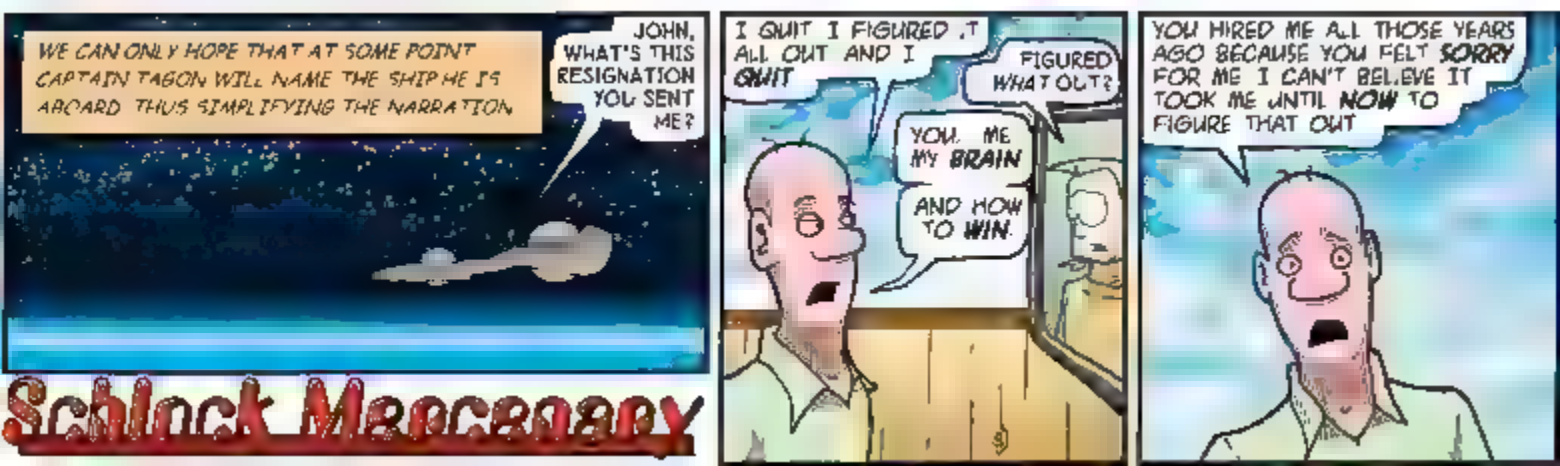
THESE TEST RESULTS ARE AMAZING. YOU SEEM TO BE ABLE TO SOLVE ANY PUZZLE THAT INCLUDES SUFFICIENT DATA FOR A SOLUTION.
YOU'RE ALSO DOING IT SO QUICKLY THAT IT LOOKS LIKE YOU'VE EITHER SEEN THE PUZZLE BEFORE, OR YOU'RE GUESSING.
I CAN'T HELP IT I JUST.. KNOW.
BUT WHAT IF NOBODY WILL BELIEVE THE ANSWER UNTIL YOU CAN SHOW YOUR WORK?
THAT'S A PROBLEM I CAN SOLVE WITH VIOLENCE

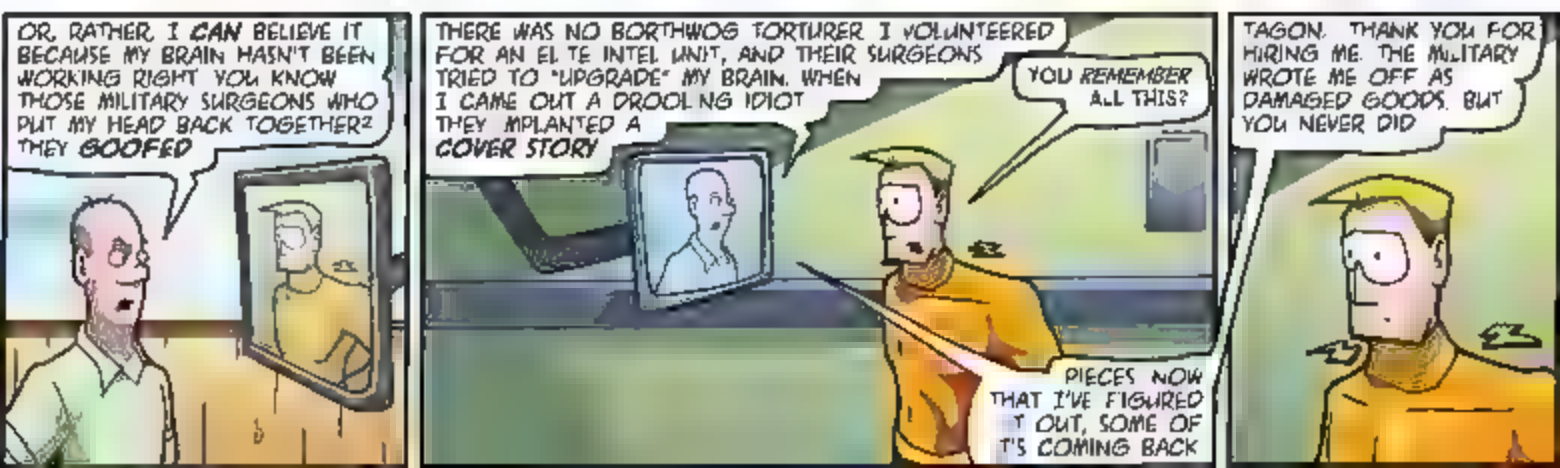

SO THAT'S HOW YOU FIGURED OUT THE SHARK THING.
I KEEP TELLING YOU, I DON'T KNOW HOW I DID IT
BUT I DO... YOU JUST LOOKED AT MAPS, FISHING DATA, AND THE PROBLEM ITSELF UNTIL SOME SUB-CONSCIOUS PART OF THAT BRAIN OF YOURS DECIDED IT HAD ENOUGH INFORMATION.
AND THEN, POW! OUT CAME THE ANSWER.
ACTUALLY IT WENT POW! OUT CAME THE HEADACHE
IF YOU DON'T MIND A PAINKILLER DEPENDENCY, YOU COULD BE A GREAT DETECTIVE

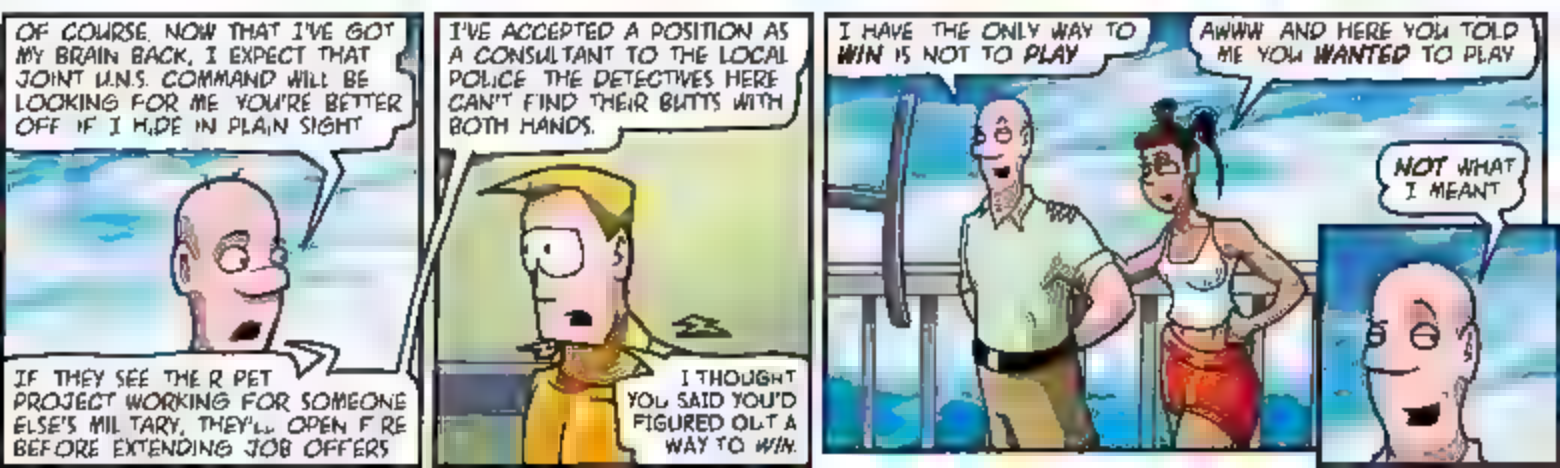
AND THAT EXPLAINS WHY TAGON HAS HAD YOU ON HIS STAFF FOR ALL THESE YEARS. SURE, YOU MAY ACT LIKE A BUMBLING BRAIN-DAMAGED COWARD, BUT YOU'RE A TACTICAL GENIUS.
AND HERE I THOUGHT THE COMPANY WAS GETTING BY ON DUMB LUCK! WHAT KINDS OF PROBLEMS HAS THE CAPTAIN HAD YOU SOLVE IN THE PAST?
HE HASN'T. THE HEADACHES ARE NEW. IT DOESN'T MAKE ANY
OWWW!
OOOH! YOU'RE DOING IT RIGHT NOW! WHAT DID YOU JUST FIGURE OUT?
THAT I NEED SOME GROG AND COFFEE

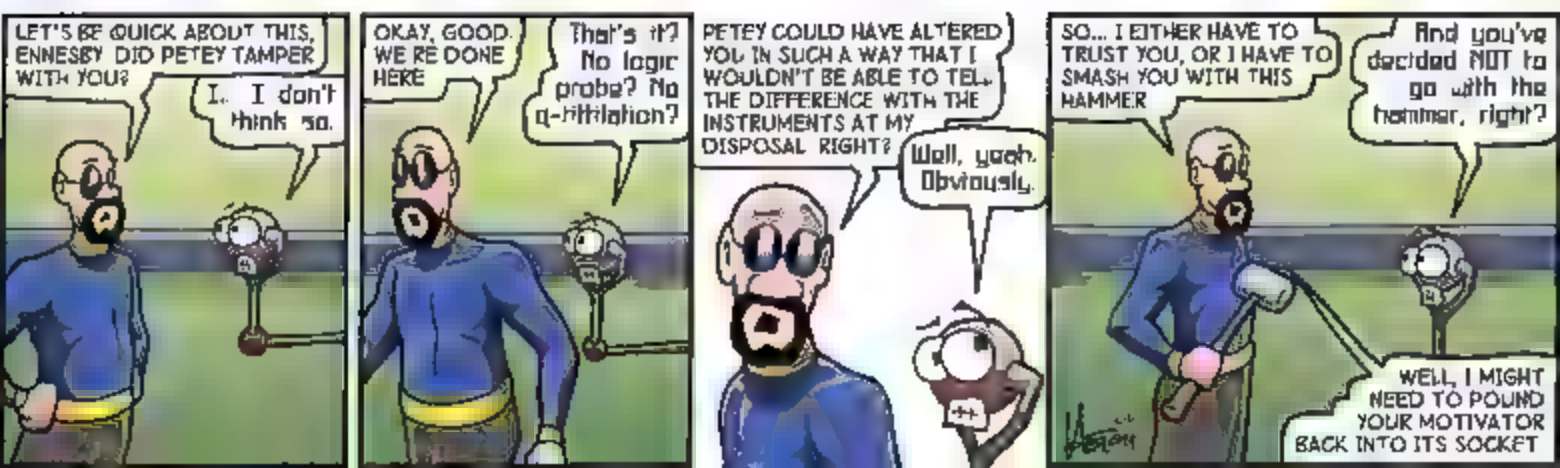

LIEUTENANT SHODAN, YOU HAVE COMMAND OF THE SHUTTLING OPERATION
WHERE ARE YOU GOING, SIR?
I'M GOING TO CHANGE CLOTHES FOREVER
WITH ALL DUE RESPECT, SIR, I'VE FOUND THAT REGULAR BATHING IS PRETTY CRITICAL TO GOOD HYGIENE. YOU HAVE TO CHANGE CLOTHES AT LEAST
NOT WHAT I MEANT


ABOARD OUR HEROES STILL-UNNAMED NEW RIDE
HEH. KEVYN, CHECK OUT THESE PICTURES LIEUTENANT COMMANDER DER TRIHS JUST SENT ME.
HE LOOKS SO GRUMPY IN THOSE TROPICAL PRINTS. HE MUST BE GLAD THE VACATION S ALMOST OVER.
CAPTAIN, THAT'S A LETTER OF RESIGNATION.
WHAT?! I DIDN'T READ THE HEY! YOU'RE RIGHT!
AND THIS IS WHY WE TRY NOT TO INCLUDE PICTURES IN OUR WRITTEN REPORTS

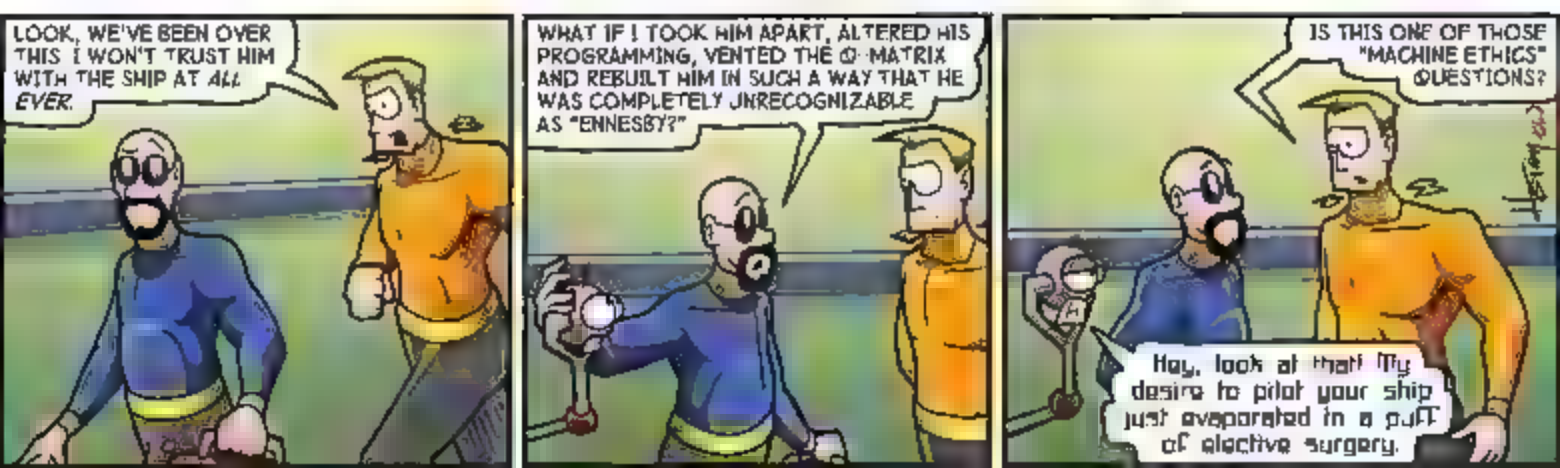

WE CAN ONLY HOPE THAT AT SOME POINT CAPTAIN TAGON WILL NAME THE SHIP HE IS ABOARD THUS SIMPLIFYING THE NARRATION
JOHN, WHAT'S THIS RESIGNATION YOU SENT ME?
I QUIT I FIGURED IT ALL OUT AND I QUIT
FIGURED WHAT OUT?
YOU. ME MY BRAIN
AND HOW TO WIN.
YOU HIRED ME ALL THOSE YEARS AGO BECAUSE YOU FELT SORRY FOR ME I CAN'T BELIEVE IT TOOK ME UNTIL NOW TO FIGURE THAT OUT
Schlock Mercenary

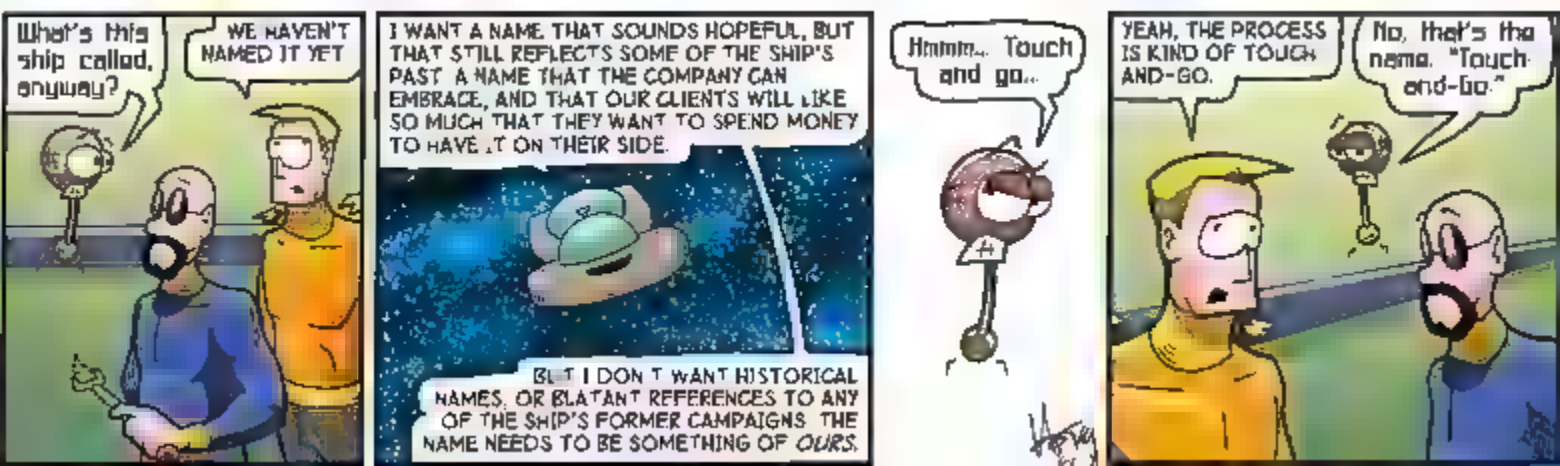

OR, RATHER, I CAN BELIEVE IT BECAUSE MY BRAIN HASN'T BEEN WORKING RIGHT. YOU KNOW THOSE MILITARY SURGEONS WHO PUT MY HEAD BACK TOGETHER? THEY GOOFED
THERE WAS NO BORTHWOG TORTURER. I VOLUNTEERED FOR AN EL TE INTEL UNIT, AND THEIR SURGEONS TRIED TO "UPGRADE" MY BRAIN. WHEN I CAME OUT A DROOL NG IDIOT THEY MPLANTED A COVER STORY
YOU REMEMBER ALL THIS?
PIECES NOW THAT I'VE FIGURED T OUT, SOME OF T'S COMING BACK
TAGON. THANK YOU FOR HIRING ME. THE MILITARY WROTE ME OFF AS DAMAGED GOODS. BUT YOU NEVER DID

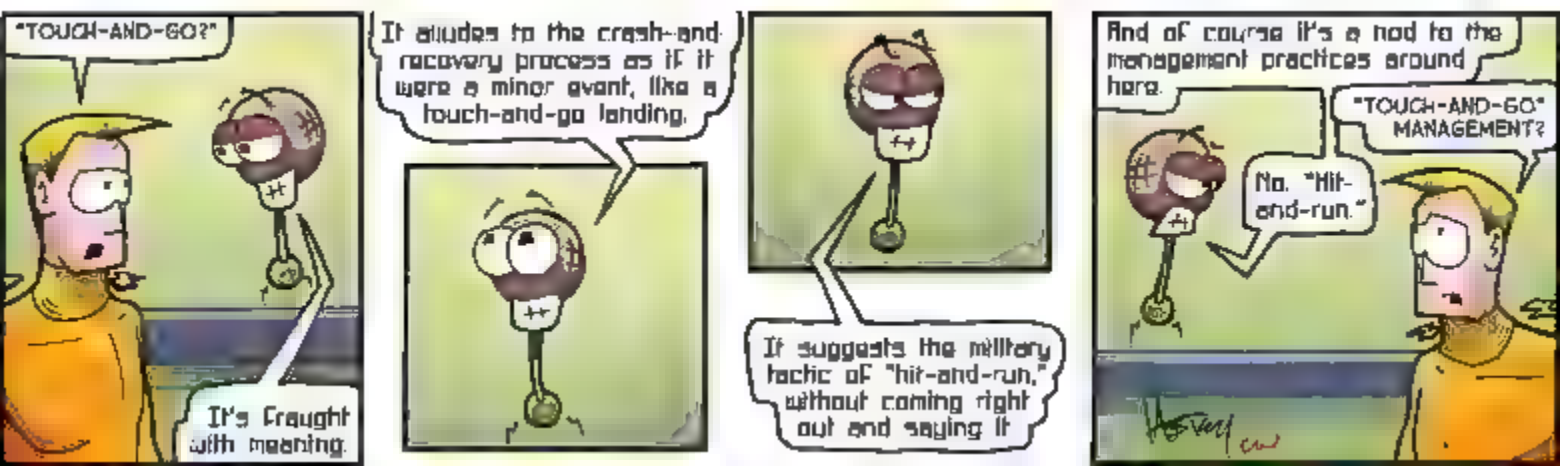

OF COURSE, NOW THAT I'VE GOT MY BRAIN BACK, I EXPECT THAT JOINT U.N.S. COMMAND WILL BE LOOKING FOR ME. YOU'RE BETTER OFF IF I HIDE IN PLAIN SIGHT
IF THEY SEE THE R PET PROJECT WORKING FOR SOMEONE ELSE'S MIL TARY, THEY'LL OPEN F RE BEFORE EXTENDING JOB OFFERS
I'VE ACCEPTED A POSITION AS A CONSULTANT TO THE LOCAL POLICE. THE DETECTIVES HERE CAN'T FIND THEIR BUTTS WITH BOTH HANDS.
I THOUGHT YOU SAID YOU'D FIGURED OUT A WAY TO WIN.
I HAVE THE ONLY WAY TO WIN IS NOT TO PLAY
AWWW AND HERE YOU TOLD ME YOU WANTED TO PLAY
NOT WHAT I MEANT


LET'S BE QUICK ABOUT THIS, ENNESBY DID PETEY TAMPER WITH YOU?
I... I don't think so.
OKAY, GOOD. WE'RE DONE HERE
That's it? No logic probe? No q-nihilation?
PETEY COULD HAVE ALTERED YOU IN SUCH A WAY THAT I WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE WITH THE INSTRUMENTS AT MY DISPOSAL RIGHT?
Well, yeah. Obviously.
SO... I EITHER HAVE TO TRUST YOU, OR I HAVE TO SMASH YOU WITH THIS HAMMER
And you've decided NOT to go with the hammer, right?
WELL, I MIGHT NEED TO POUND YOUR MOTIVATOR BACK INTO ITS SOCKET

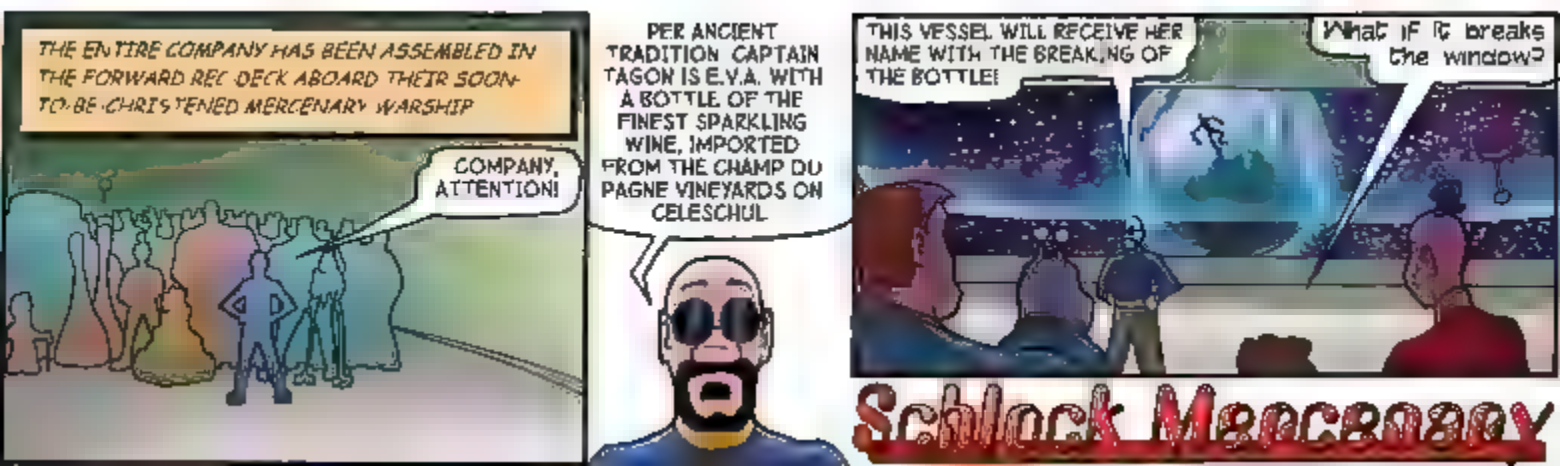
ENNESBY CHECKS OUT. I'M CONFIDENT THAT HE HASN'T BEEN TAMPERED WITH.
SO, YOU TRUST HIM TO FLY THE SHIP?
ARE YOU CRAZY? OF COURSE NOT
BUT YOU SAID
HE HASN'T BEEN TAMPERED WITH. AND THAT'S THE PROBLEM
I WON'T TRUST HIM WITH THE SHIP UNTIL I'VE PROPERLY TAMPERED WITH HIM

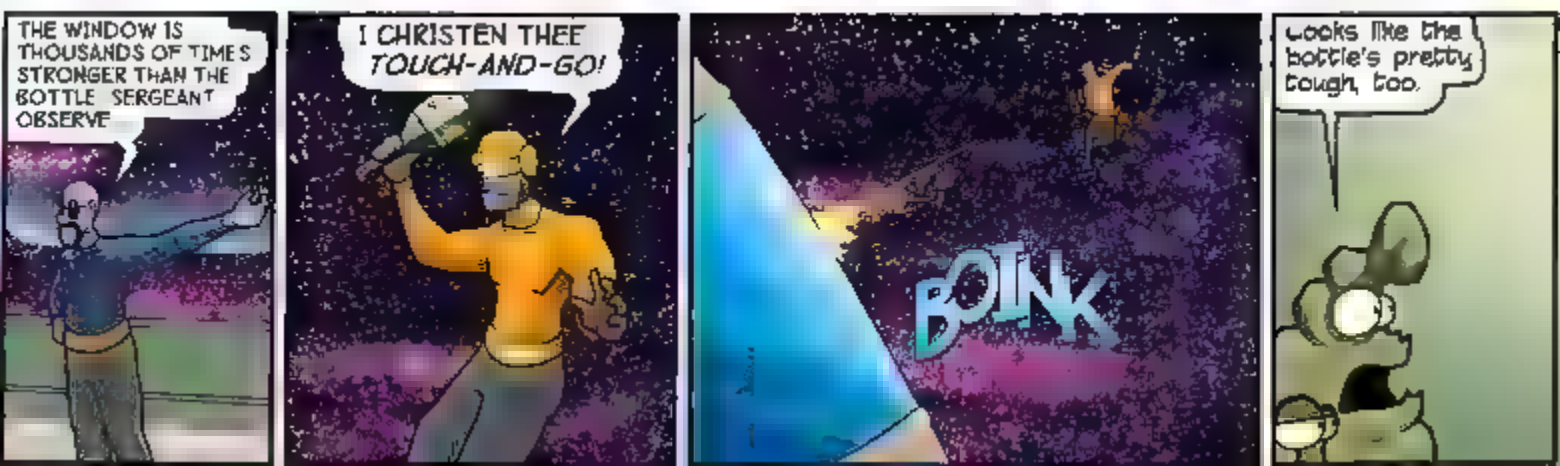

LOOK, WE'VE BEEN OVER THIS. I WON'T TRUST HIM WITH THE SHIP AT *ALL EVER.*
WHAT IF I TOOK HIM APART, ALTERED HIS PROGRAMMING, VENTED THE Q-MATRIX AND REBUILT HIM IN SUCH A WAY THAT HE WAS COMPLETELY UNRECOGNIZABLE AS "ENNESBY?"
IS THIS ONE OF THOSE "MACHINE ETHICS" QUESTIONS?
Hey, look at that! My desire to pilot your ship just evaporated in a puff of elective surgery.


What's this ship called, anyway?
WE HAVEN'T NAMED IT YET
I WANT A NAME THAT SOUNDS HOPEFUL, BUT THAT STILL REFLECTS SOME OF THE SHIP'S PAST. A NAME THAT THE COMPANY CAN EMBRACE, AND THAT OUR CLIENTS WILL LIKE SO MUCH THAT THEY WANT TO SPEND MONEY TO HAVE IT ON THEIR SIDE.
BUT I DON'T WANT HISTORICAL NAMES, OR BLATANT REFERENCES TO ANY OF THE SHIP'S FORMER CAMPAIGNS. THE NAME NEEDS TO BE SOMETHING OF *OURS*.
Hmmm... Touch and go...
YEAH, THE PROCESS IS KIND OF TOUCH AND-GO.
No, that's the name. "Touch and-Go."

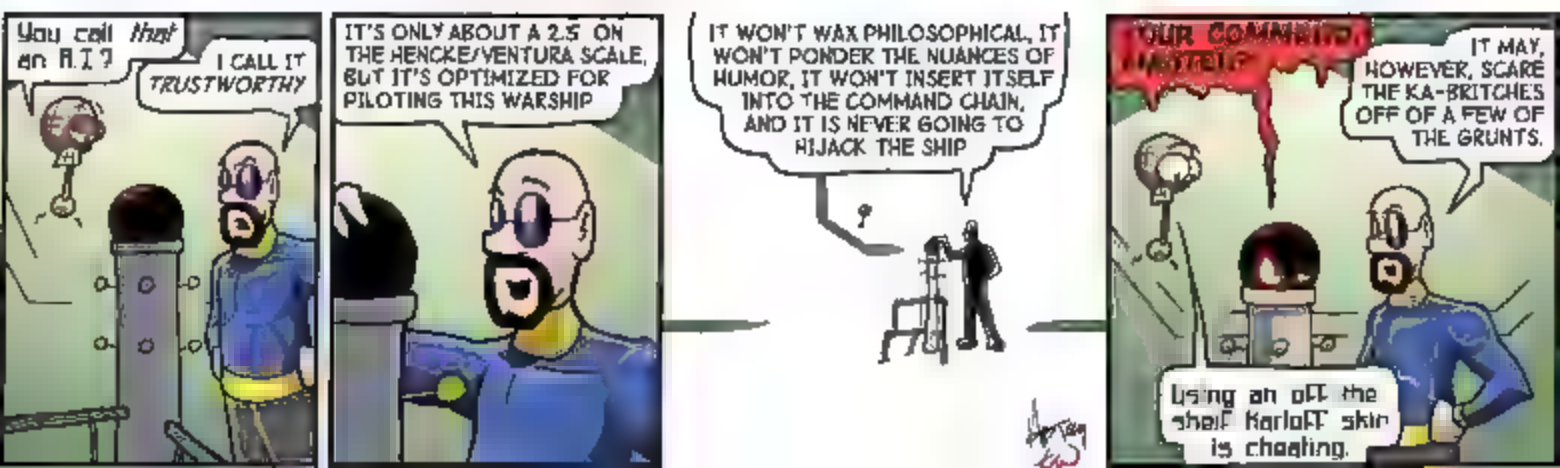

"TOUCH-AND-GO?"
It's fraught with meaning.
It alludes to the crash-and-recovery process as if it were a minor event, like a touch-and-go landing.
It suggests the military tactic of "hit-and-run," without coming right out and saying it
And of course it's a nod to the management practices around here.
"TOUCH-AND-GO" MANAGEMENT?
No. "Hit-and-run."

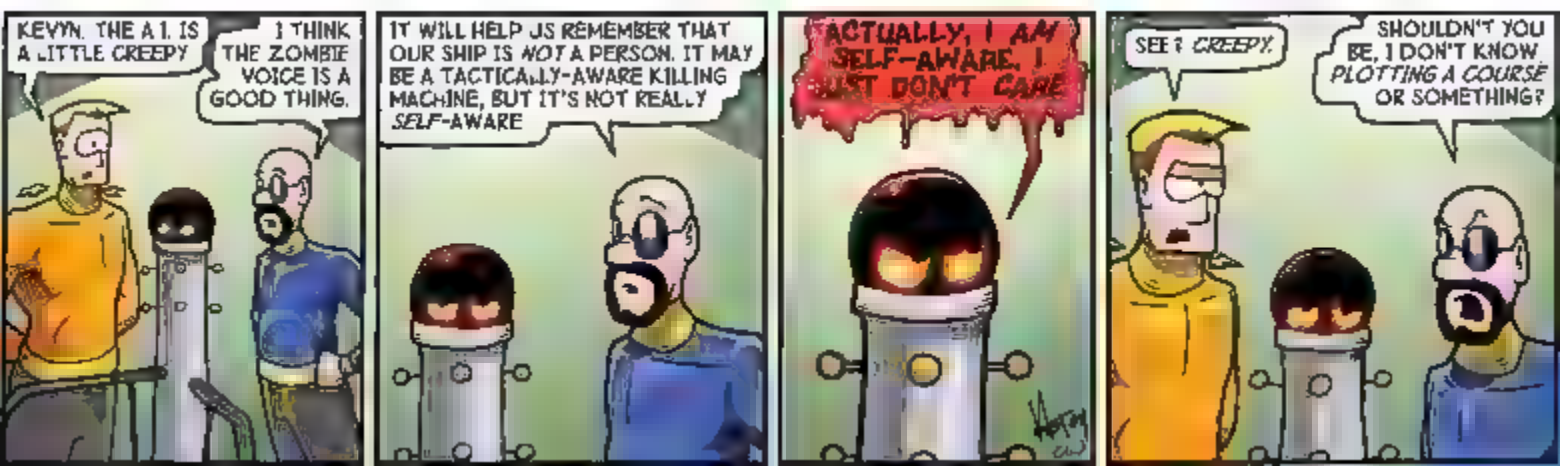
THAT REMINDS ME. WE'VE GOT A COUPLE OF HOLES IN THE COMMAND CHAIN RIGHT NOW
LIEUTENANT COMMANDER DER TRIHS HAS RESIGNED AND LIEUTENANT FOXWORTHY IS ON MEDICAL LEAVE
YOU MAY HAVE TO BE A MORE "HANDS-ON" SORT OF COMMANDER FOR A WHILE
BUT... I JUST GOT A NEW LAB... TWO FAB-CAPABLE MACHINE SHOPS. ALL THESE NEW TOYS TO TEST.
My sensors indicate that behind those glasses his eyes have glazed over

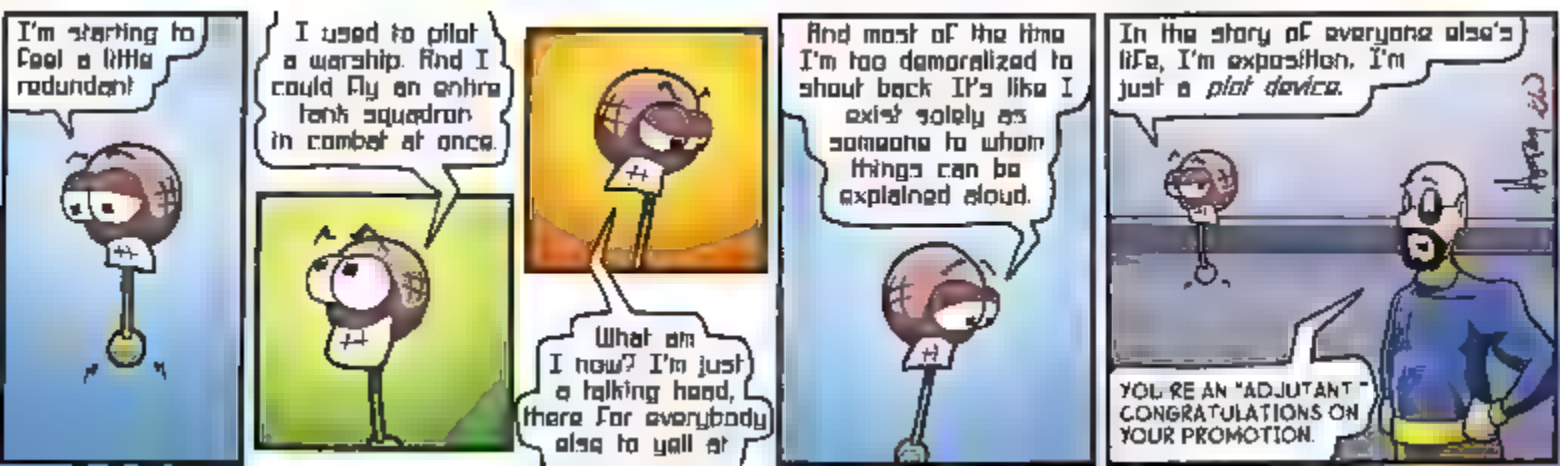

THE ENTIRE COMPANY HAS BEEN ASSEMBLED IN THE FORWARD REC DECK ABOARD THEIR SOON-TO-BE-CHRISTENED MERCENARY WARSHIP
COMPANY, ATTENTION!
PER ANCIENT TRADITION CAPTAIN TAGON IS E.V.A. WITH A BOTTLE OF THE FINEST SPARKLING WINE, IMPORTED FROM THE CHAMP DU PAGNE VINEYARDS ON CELESCHUL
THIS VESSEL WILL RECEIVE HER NAME WITH THE BREAKING OF THE BOTTLE!
What if it breaks the window?
Schlock Mercenary

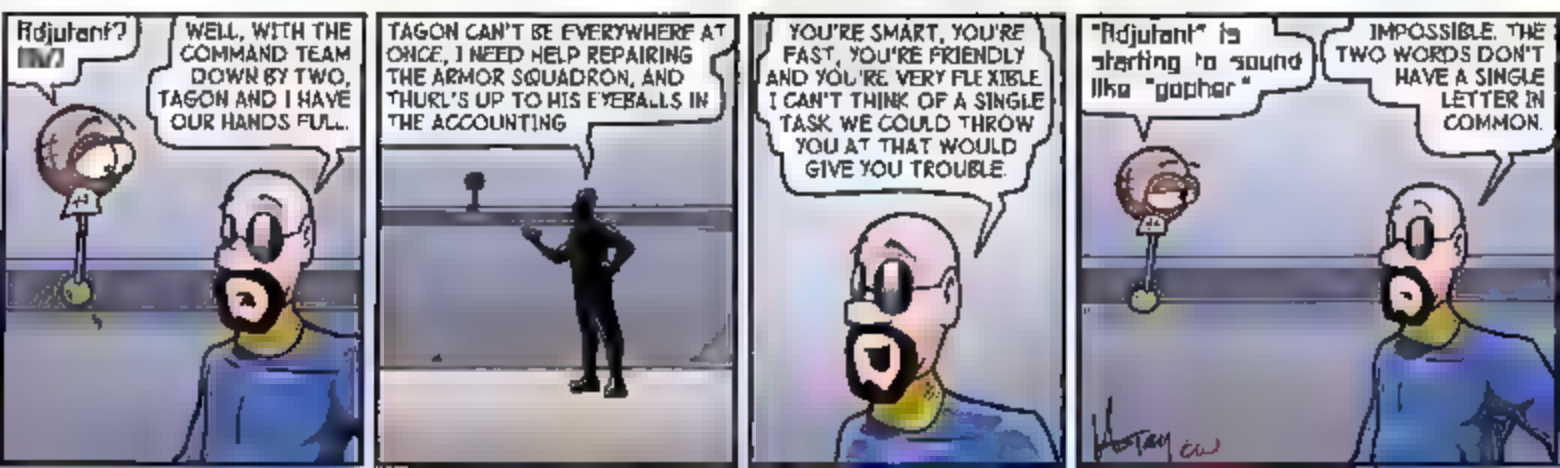

THE WINDOW IS THOUSANDS OF TIMES STRONGER THAN THE BOTTLE SERGEANT OBSERVE
I CHRISTEN THEE TOUCH-AND-GO!
BOINK
Looks like the bottle's pretty tough, too.

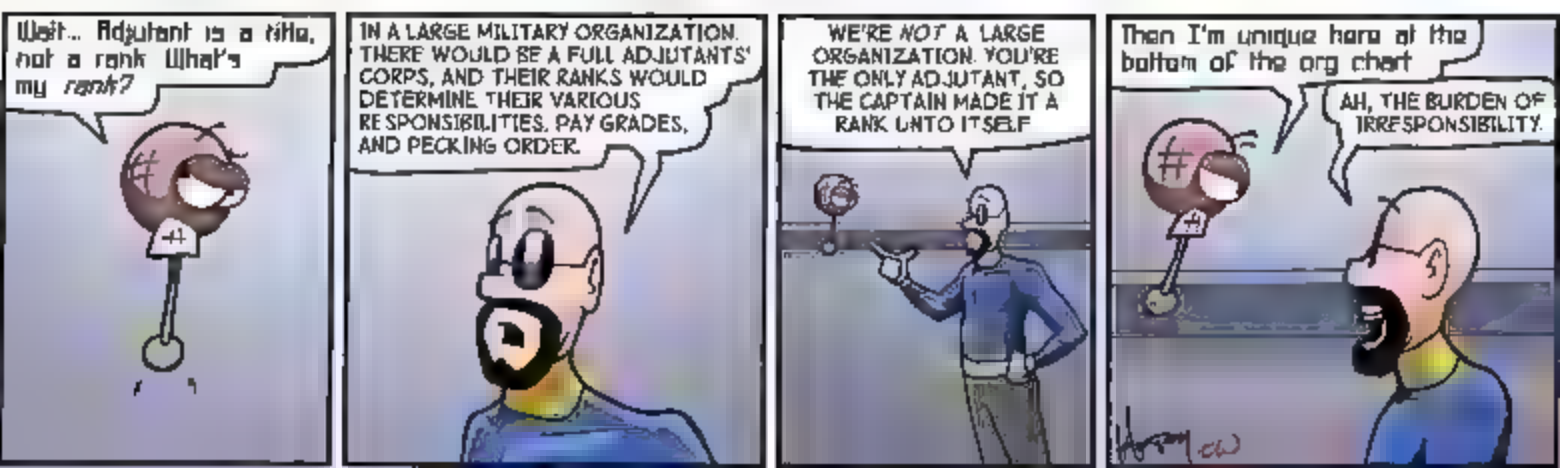
IT'S OKAY I CAUGHT IT LET'S TRY THIS AGAIN
I CHRISTEN THEE, TOUCH-AND-GO!
NOW I'LL JUST OPEN IT AND POUR
UMM.. CAPTAIN SPARKLING WINE IS
UNDER PRESSURE
Best christening ever!
IT'S ALRIGHT I'M OKAY!

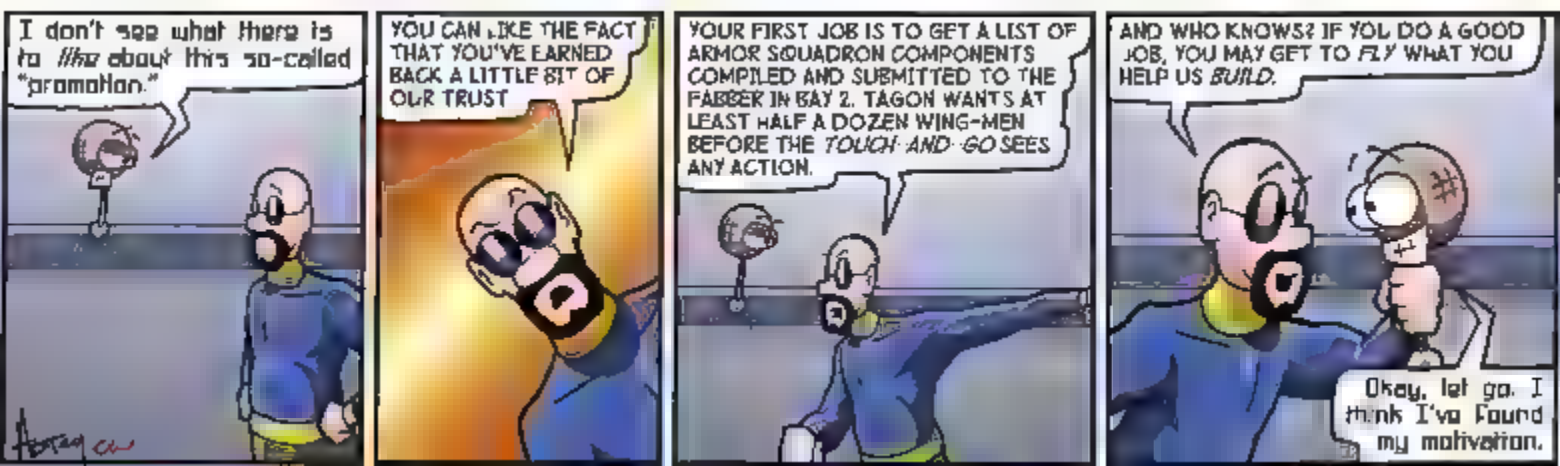

You call that an A.I.?
I CALL IT TRUSTWORTHY
IT'S ONLY ABOUT A 2.5 ON THE HENCKE/VENTURA SCALE, BUT IT'S OPTIMIZED FOR PILOTING THIS WARSHIP
IT WON'T WAX PHILOSOPHICAL, IT WON'T PONDER THE NUANCES OF HUMOR, IT WON'T INSERT ITSELF INTO THE COMMAND CHAIN, AND IT IS NEVER GOING TO HIJACK THE SHIP
?
IT MAY, HOWEVER, SCARE THE KA-BRITCHES OFF OF A FEW OF THE GRUNTS.
Using an off the shelf Karloff skin is cheating.

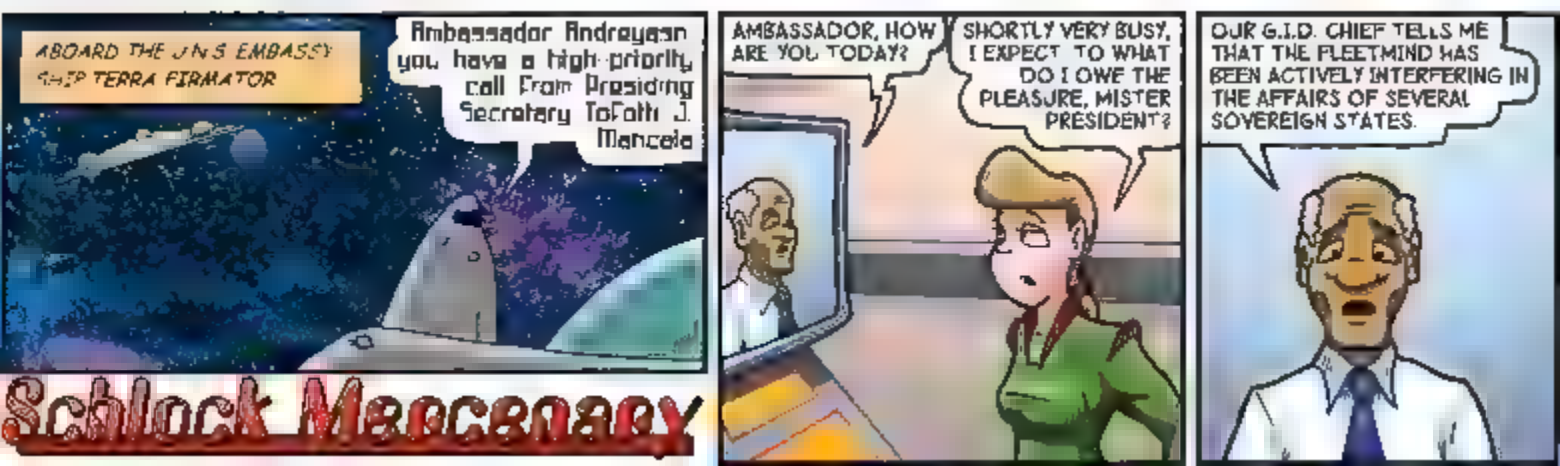

KEVYN, THE A.I. IS A LITTLE CREEPY
I THINK THE ZOMBIE VOICE IS A GOOD THING.
IT WILL HELP US REMEMBER THAT OUR SHIP IS *NOT* A PERSON. IT MAY BE A TACTICALLY-AWARE KILLING MACHINE, BUT IT'S NOT REALLY *SELF*-AWARE
ACTUALLY, I AM SELF-AWARE. I JUST DON'T CARE
SEE? *CREEPY.*
SHOULDN'T YOU BE, I DON'T KNOW, *PLOTTING A COURSE* OR SOMETHING?

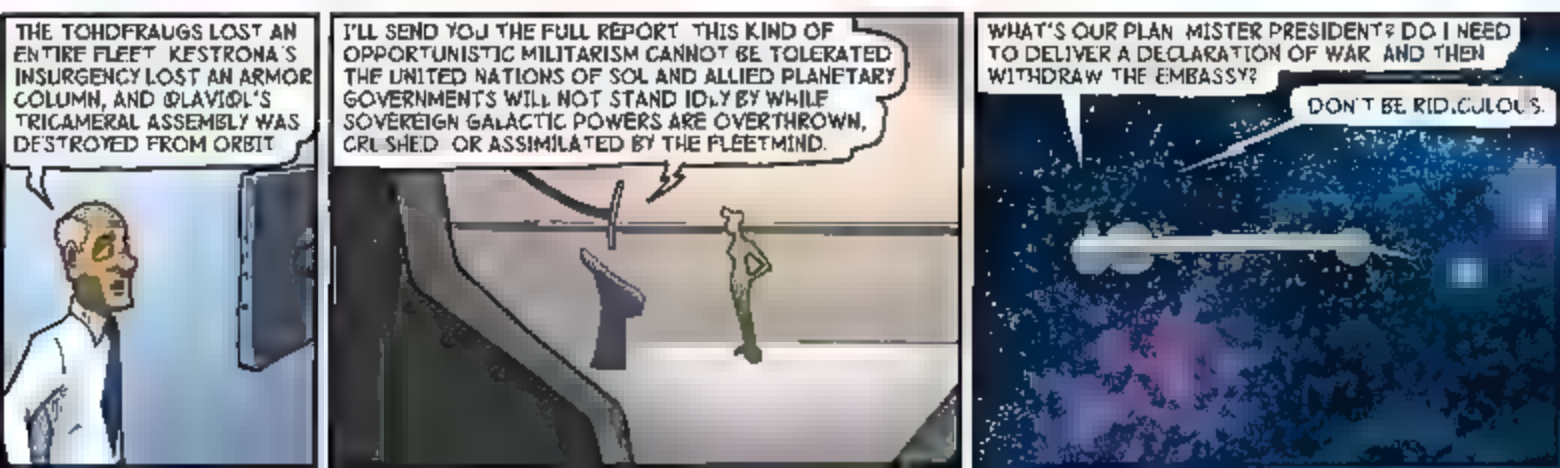

I'm starting to feel a little redundant
I used to pilot a warship. And I could fly an entire tank squadron in combat at once.
What am I now? I'm just a talking head, there for everybody else to yell at
And most of the time I'm too demoralized to shout back. It's like I exist solely as someone to whom things can be explained aloud.
In the story of everyone else's life, I'm exposition. I'm just a *plot device*.
YOU'RE AN "ADJUTANT." CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR PROMOTION.


Adjutant?
WELL, WITH THE COMMAND TEAM DOWN BY TWO, TAGON AND I HAVE OUR HANDS FULL.
TAGON CAN'T BE EVERYWHERE AT ONCE, I NEED HELP REPAIRING THE ARMOR SQUADRON, AND THURL'S UP TO HIS EYEBALLS IN THE ACCOUNTING
YOU'RE SMART, YOU'RE FAST, YOU'RE FRIENDLY AND YOU'RE VERY FLEXIBLE. I CAN'T THINK OF A SINGLE TASK WE COULD THROW YOU AT THAT WOULD GIVE YOU TROUBLE.
"Adjutant" is starting to sound like "gopher"
IMPOSSIBLE. THE TWO WORDS DON'T HAVE A SINGLE LETTER IN COMMON.


Wait... Adjutant is a title, not a rank. What's my *rank*?
IN A LARGE MILITARY ORGANIZATION, THERE WOULD BE A FULL ADJUTANTS' CORPS, AND THEIR RANKS WOULD DETERMINE THEIR VARIOUS RESPONSIBILITIES, PAY GRADES, AND PECKING ORDER.
WE'RE *NOT* A LARGE ORGANIZATION. YOU'RE THE ONLY ADJUTANT, SO THE CAPTAIN MADE IT A RANK UNTO ITSELF
Then I'm unique here at the bottom of the org chart
AH, THE BURDEN OF IRRESPONSIBILITY.

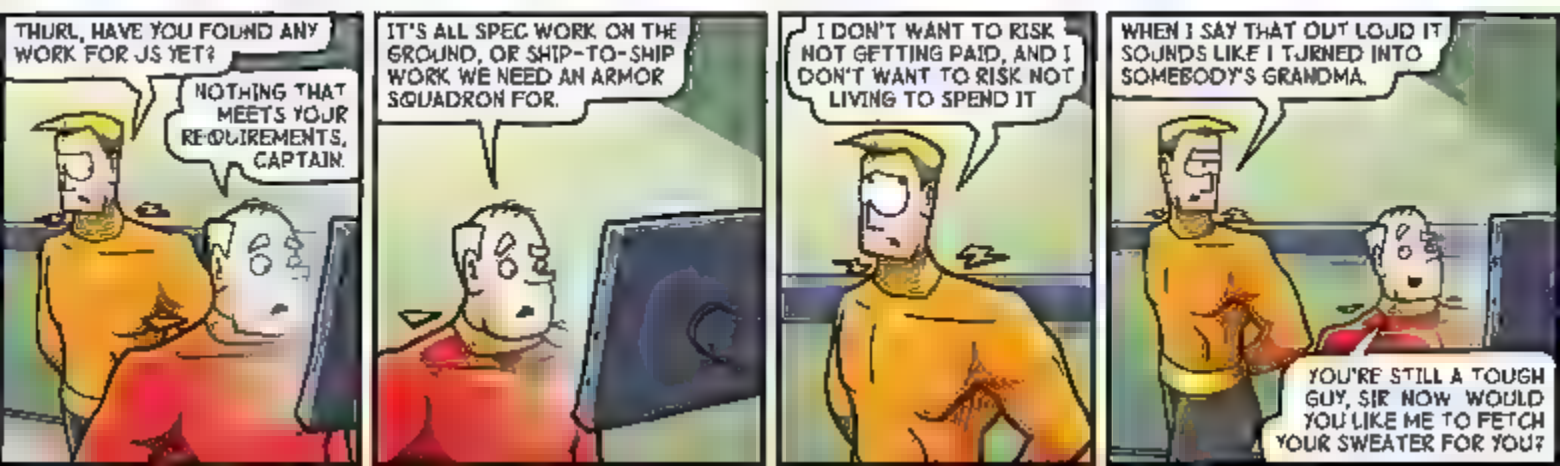

I don't see what there is to *like* about this so-called "promotion."
YOU CAN LIKE THE FACT THAT YOU'VE EARNED BACK A LITTLE BIT OF OUR TRUST.
YOUR FIRST JOB IS TO GET A LIST OF ARMOR SQUADRON COMPONENTS COMPILED AND SUBMITTED TO THE FABBER IN BAY 2. TAGON WANTS AT LEAST HALF A DOZEN WING-MEN BEFORE THE *TOUCH AND GO* SEES ANY ACTION.
AND WHO KNOWS? IF YOU DO A GOOD JOB, YOU MAY GET TO *FLY* WHAT YOU HELP US *BUILD*.
Okay, let go. I think I've found my motivation.


ABOARD THE U.N.S EMBASSY SHIP TERRA FIRMATOR
Ambassador Andreyasn you have a high-priority call from Presiding Secretary ToFolli J. Mancela
AMBASSADOR, HOW ARE YOU TODAY?
SHORTLY VERY BUSY, I EXPECT TO WHAT DO I OWE THE PLEASURE, MISTER PRESIDENT?
OUR G.I.D. CHIEF TELLS ME THAT THE FLEETMIND HAS BEEN ACTIVELY INTERFERING IN THE AFFAIRS OF SEVERAL SOVEREIGN STATES.
Schlock Mercenary

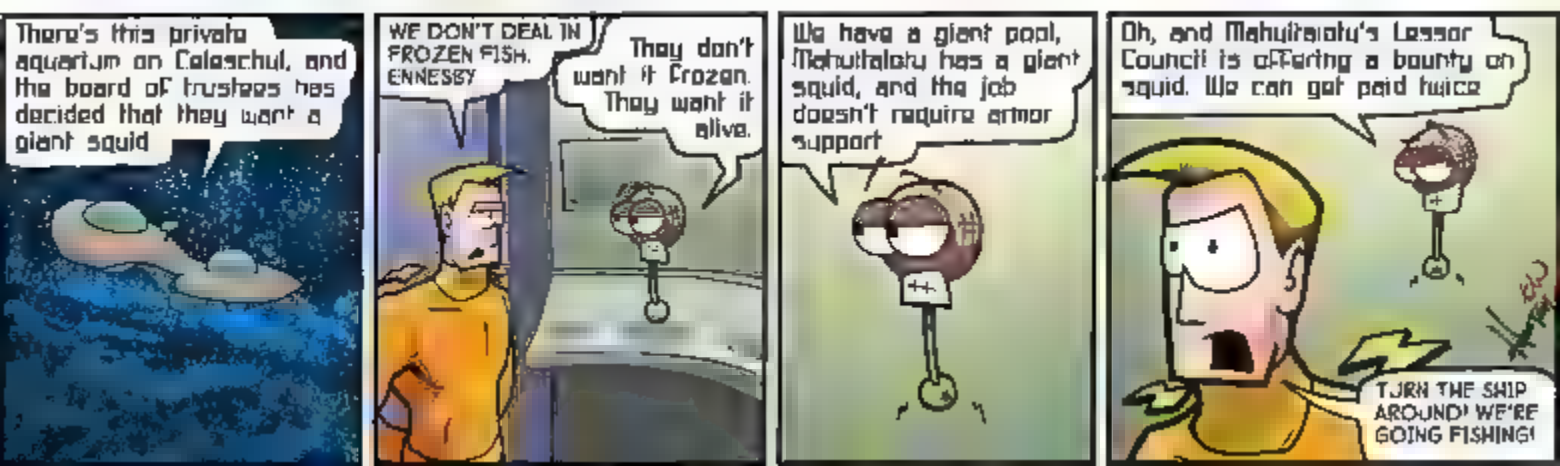

THE TOHDFRAUGS LOST AN ENTIRE FLEET KESTRONA'S INSURGENCY LOST AN ARMOR COLUMN, AND QLAVIQL'S TRICAMERAL ASSEMBLY WAS DESTROYED FROM ORBIT
I'LL SEND YOU THE FULL REPORT THIS KIND OF OPPORTUNISTIC MILITARISM CANNOT BE TOLERATED THE UNITED NATIONS OF SOL AND ALLIED PLANETARY GOVERNMENTS WILL NOT STAND IDLY BY WHILE SOVEREIGN GALACTIC POWERS ARE OVERTHROWN, CRUSHED OR ASSIMILATED BY THE FLEETMIND.
WHAT'S OUR PLAN MISTER PRESIDENT? DO I NEED TO DELIVER A DECLARATION OF WAR AND THEN WITHDRAW THE EMBASSY?
DON'T BE RIDICULOUS.

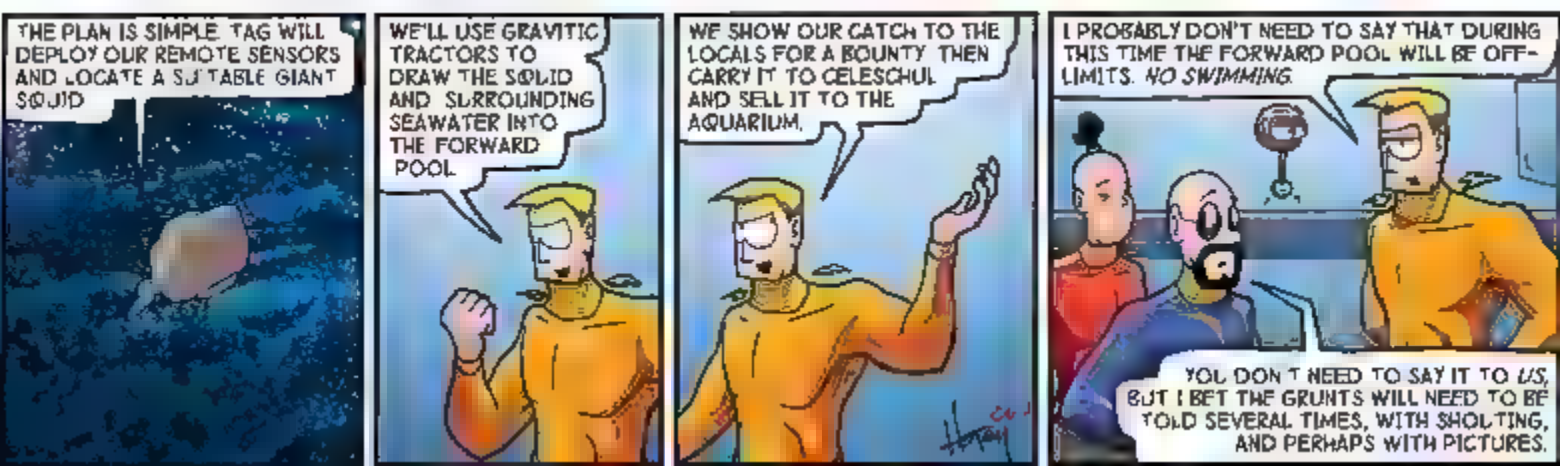
YOUR JOB IS TO LODGE A PROTEST, USING THE STRONGEST POSSIBLE DIPLOMATIC LANGUAGE
AH.
AND HOW IS THAT DIFFERENT FROM "STANDING IDLY BY?"
IF WE WERE STANDING IDLY BY, WE WOULD NOT BE LODGING A PROTEST
WOW WE ARE FEARSOME

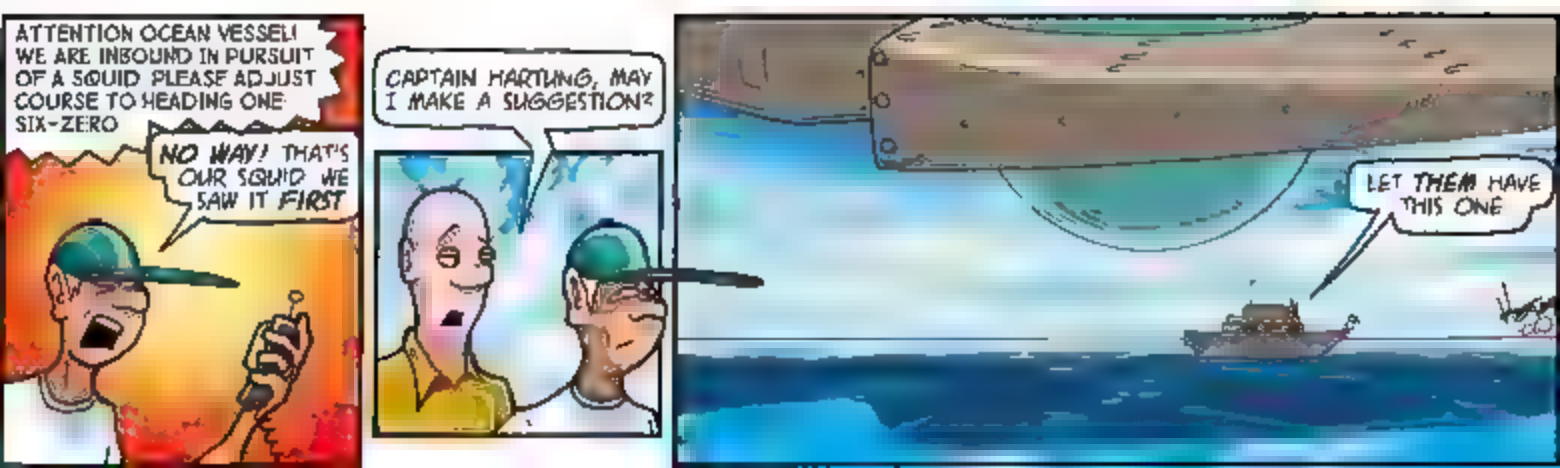
I've downloaded the diagnostics from our damaged armor units and fed the parts list to Fabber 2. We'll have everything we need in about six days.
EXCELLENT. NOW, COULD YOU
report to Thurl, because he needs help with the accounting?
I've already done that.
The books are balanced, the bills are paid, and in order to make payroll next week, we're going to have to beg, borrow, or steal.
OKAY. WELL, I GUESS I'LL GO
tell the captain? I did that already.
He suggested that maybe we could find some paying work.

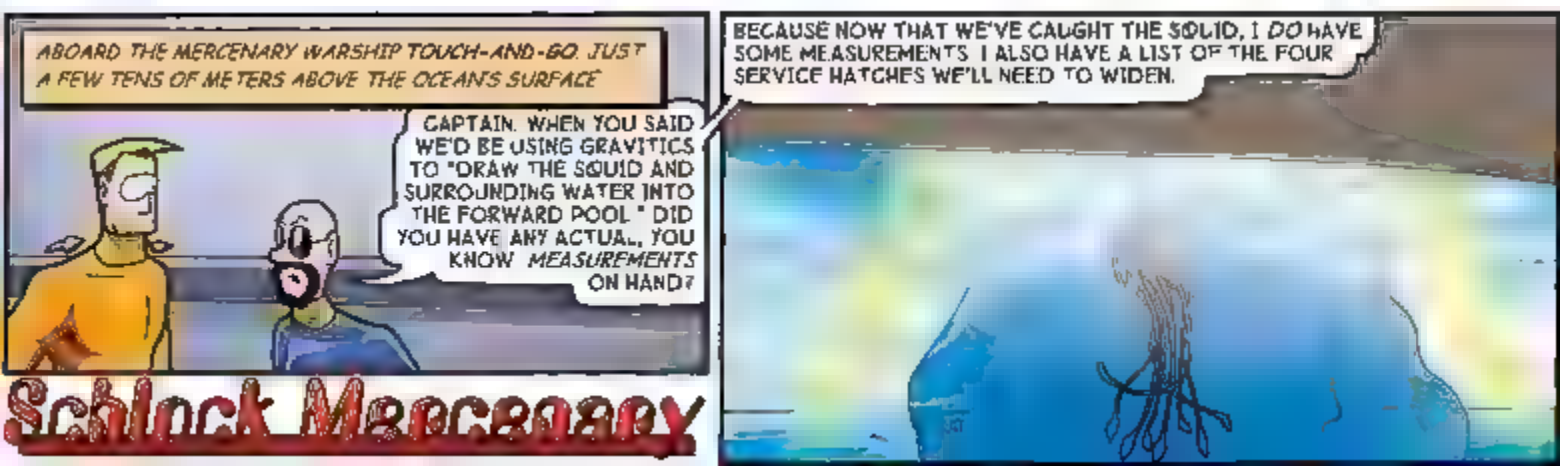

THURL, HAVE YOU FOUND ANY WORK FOR US YET?
NOTHING THAT MEETS YOUR REQUIREMENTS, CAPTAIN.
IT'S ALL SPEC WORK ON THE GROUND, OR SHIP-TO-SHIP WORK WE NEED AN ARMOR SQUADRON FOR.
I DON'T WANT TO RISK NOT GETTING PAID, AND I DON'T WANT TO RISK NOT LIVING TO SPEND IT
WHEN I SAY THAT OUT LOUD IT SOUNDS LIKE I TURNED INTO SOMEBODY'S GRANDMA.
YOU'RE STILL A TOUGH GUY, SIR NOW WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO FETCH YOUR SWEATER FOR YOU?

Captain, I've been surfing H-bay's "I want it" list. Guess what I found?
SOME ECCENTRIC WACKO WANTS SOMETHING REALLY CREEPY AND WEIRD, AND IS WILLING TO PAY A SMALL FORTUNE FOR IT?
It's no fair if you guess it by using wildcards.
JUST TELL ME WHAT YOU FOUND.

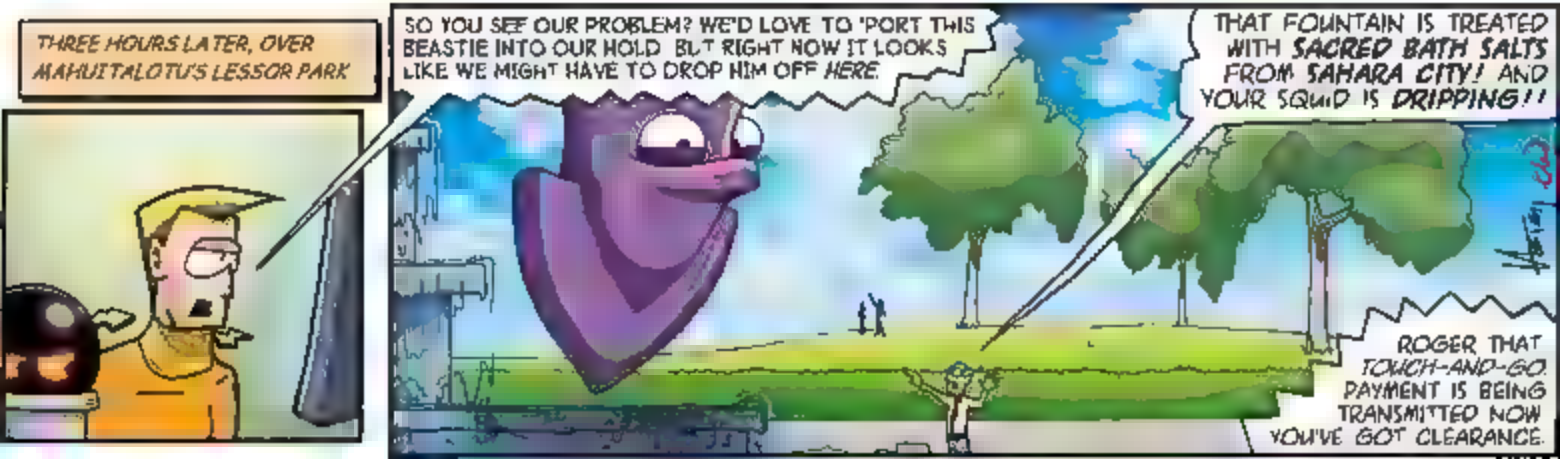

There's this private aquarium on Coleschul, and the board of trustees has decided that they want a giant squid
WE DON'T DEAL IN FROZEN FISH. ENNESSY
They don't want it frozen. They want it alive.
We have a giant pool, Mahuitaloku has a giant squid, and the job doesn't require armor support
Oh, and Mahuitaloku's Lessor Council is offering a bounty on squid. We can get paid twice
TURN THE SHIP AROUND! WE'RE GOING FISHING!

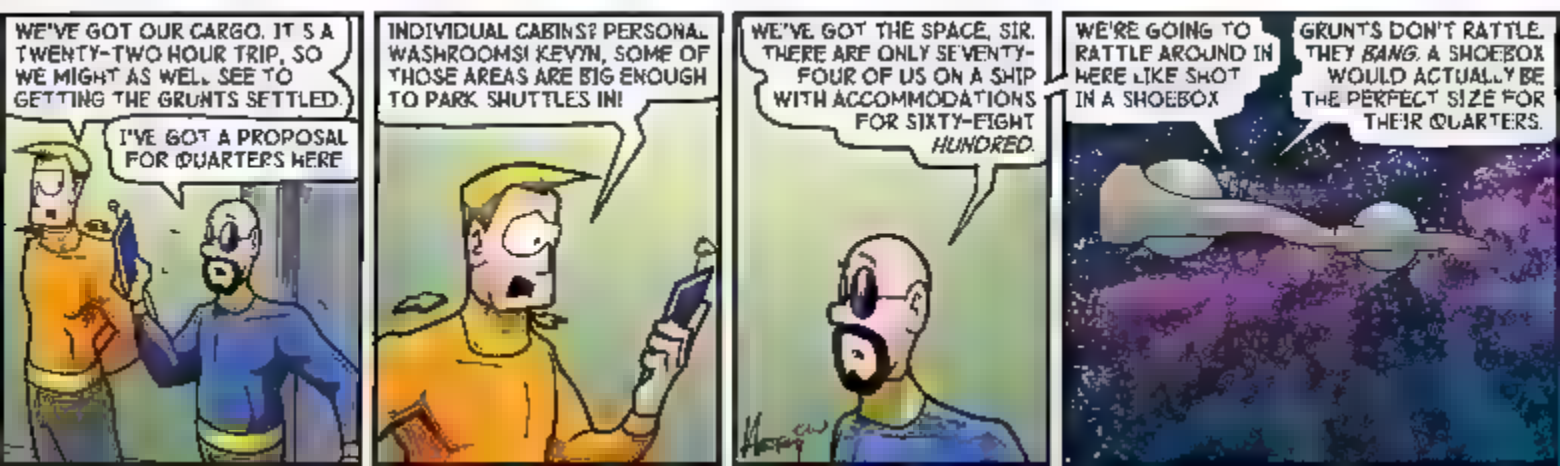

THE PLAN IS SIMPLE. TAG WILL DEPLOY OUR REMOTE SENSORS AND LOCATE A SUITABLE GIANT SQUID
WE'LL USE GRAVITIC TRACTORS TO DRAW THE SQUID AND SURROUNDING SEAWATER INTO THE FORWARD POOL.
WE SHOW OUR CATCH TO THE LOCALS FOR A BOUNTY. THEN CARRY IT TO CELESCHUL AND SELL IT TO THE AQUARIUM.
I PROBABLY DON'T NEED TO SAY THAT DURING THIS TIME THE FORWARD POOL WILL BE OFF-LIMITS. *NO SWIMMING.*
YOU DON'T NEED TO SAY IT TO *US*, BUT I BET THE GRUNTS WILL NEED TO BE TOLD SEVERAL TIMES, WITH SHOUTING, AND PERHAPS WITH PICTURES.


ATTENTION OCEAN VESSEL! WE ARE INBOUND IN PURSUIT OF A SQUID. PLEASE ADJUST COURSE TO HEADING ONE SIX-ZERO
NO WAY! THAT'S OUR SQUID. WE SAW IT FIRST
CAPTAIN HARTUNG, MAY I MAKE A SUGGESTION?
LET THEM HAVE THIS ONE

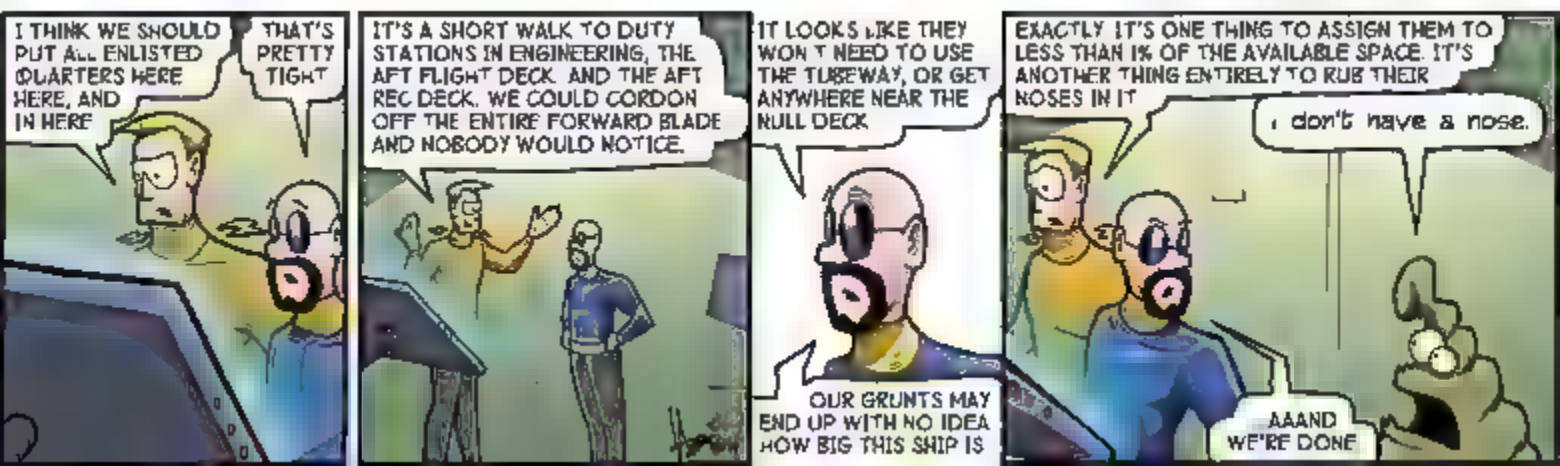

ABOARD THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH-AND-GO. JUST A FEW TENS OF METERS ABOVE THE OCEAN'S SURFACE
CAPTAIN. WHEN YOU SAID WE'D BE USING GRAVITICS TO "DRAW THE SQUID AND SURROUNDING WATER INTO THE FORWARD POOL" DID YOU HAVE ANY ACTUAL, YOU KNOW MEASUREMENTS ON HAND?
BECAUSE NOW THAT WE'VE CAUGHT THE SQUID, I DO HAVE SOME MEASUREMENTS. I ALSO HAVE A LIST OF THE FOUR SERVICE HATCHES WE'LL NEED TO WIDEN.
Schlock Mercenary

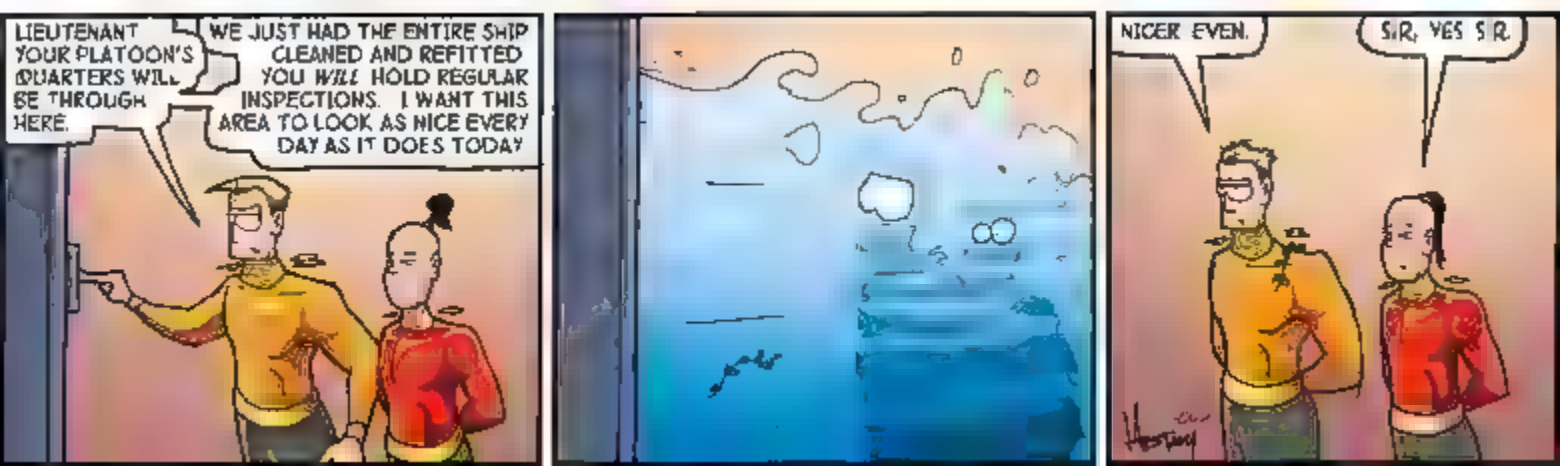
AFTER ALL THE CLEANUP AND REFITTING, THERE'S NO WAY I'M LETTING YOU WIDEN ANY OF OUR HATCHES, OR CUT HOLES IN BULKHEADS. WE'LL JUST USE THE TERAPORT
MAHUITAMOTU'S GLOBAL ANTI-TERAPORT SYSTEMS ARE STATE OF THE ART I CHECKED.
YUP. WE JUST NEED TO CONVINCE THEM TO PAINT A QUICK EXCLUSION FOR US.
TAG, GO AHEAD AND TAKE THAT COURSE WE LAID IN.
MY PIECE.

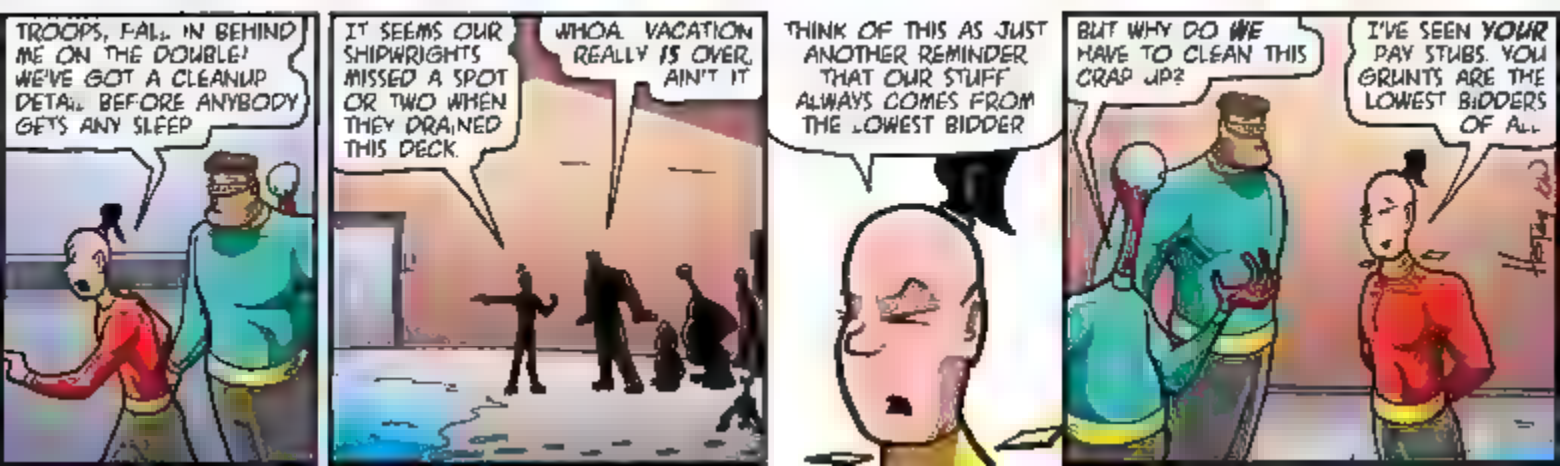

THREE HOURS LATER, OVER MAHUITALOTU'S LESSOR PARK
SO YOU SEE OUR PROBLEM? WE'D LOVE TO 'PORT THIS BEASTIE INTO OUR HOLD BUT RIGHT NOW IT LOOKS LIKE WE MIGHT HAVE TO DROP HIM OFF HERE.
THAT FOUNTAIN IS TREATED WITH SACRED BATH SALTS FROM SAHARA CITY! AND YOUR SQUID IS DRIPPING!!
ROGER THAT. TOUCH-AND-GO PAYMENT IS BEING TRANSMITTED NOW. YOU'VE GOT CLEARANCE.

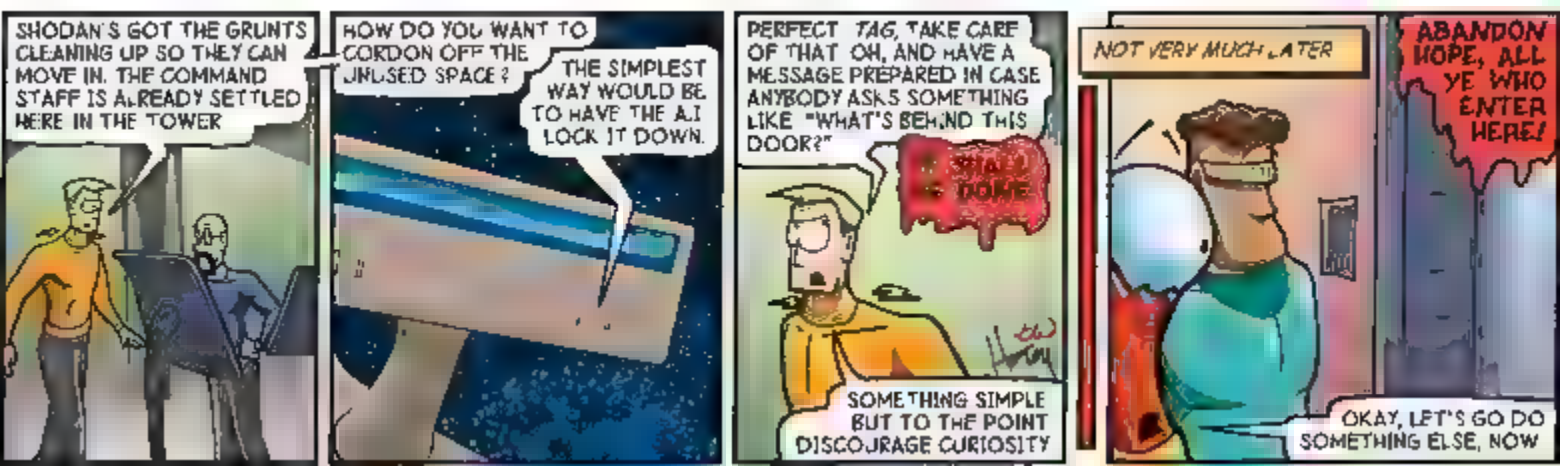

WE'VE GOT OUR CARGO. IT'S A TWENTY-TWO HOUR TRIP, SO WE MIGHT AS WELL SEE TO GETTING THE GRUNTS SETTLED.
I'VE GOT A PROPOSAL FOR QUARTERS HERE
INDIVIDUAL CABINS? PERSONAL WASHROOMS! KEVYN, SOME OF THOSE AREAS ARE BIG ENOUGH TO PARK SHUTTLES IN!
WE'VE GOT THE SPACE, SIR. THERE ARE ONLY SEVENTY-FOUR OF US ON A SHIP WITH ACCOMMODATIONS FOR SIXTY-EIGHT *HUNDRED*.
WE'RE GOING TO RATTLE AROUND IN HERE LIKE SHOT IN A SHOEBOX
GRUNTS DON'T RATTLE. THEY *BANG*. A SHOEBOX WOULD ACTUALLY BE THE PERFECT SIZE FOR THEIR QUARTERS.

I WAS IN AN INFANTRY UNIT ONCE WHEN DEPLOYMENTS LEFT US WITH ONE COMPANY OF SOLDIERS TO ABOUT FIVE COMPANIES WORTH OF EMPTY BARRACKS.
THE MAJOR WAS GREEN BRASS. HE LET US SPREAD OUT A BIT, AND NEGLECTED TO SECURE THE UNUSED BUILDINGS.
WITHIN TWO WEEKS WE HAD FOUR STILLS, TWO SMACK LABS, AN ONSITE ESCORT SERVICE, A TWO-STAR CASINO, AND A GREENHOUSE FULL OF HYPERJUANA.
SO... YOU WANT ME TO ASSIGN STANDARD-SIZED BARRACKS, AND THEN LOCK DOWN THE EXTRA SPACE?
WHEN THEY TRIED TO PULL US BACK IN, SOME OF THE MEN LODGED THEIR PROTESTS WITH ROCKET LAUNCHERS.


I THINK WE SHOULD PUT ALL ENLISTED QUARTERS HERE HERE, AND IN HERE
THAT'S PRETTY TIGHT
IT'S A SHORT WALK TO DUTY STATIONS IN ENGINEERING, THE AFT FLIGHT DECK AND THE AFT REC DECK. WE COULD CORDON OFF THE ENTIRE FORWARD BLADE AND NOBODY WOULD NOTICE.
IT LOOKS LIKE THEY WON'T NEED TO USE THE TUBEWAY, OR GET ANYWHERE NEAR THE NULL DECK.
OUR GRUNTS MAY END UP WITH NO IDEA HOW BIG THIS SHIP IS
EXACTLY. IT'S ONE THING TO ASSIGN THEM TO LESS THAN 1% OF THE AVAILABLE SPACE. IT'S ANOTHER THING ENTIRELY TO RUB THEIR NOSES IN IT.
I don't have a nose.
AAAND WE'RE DONE

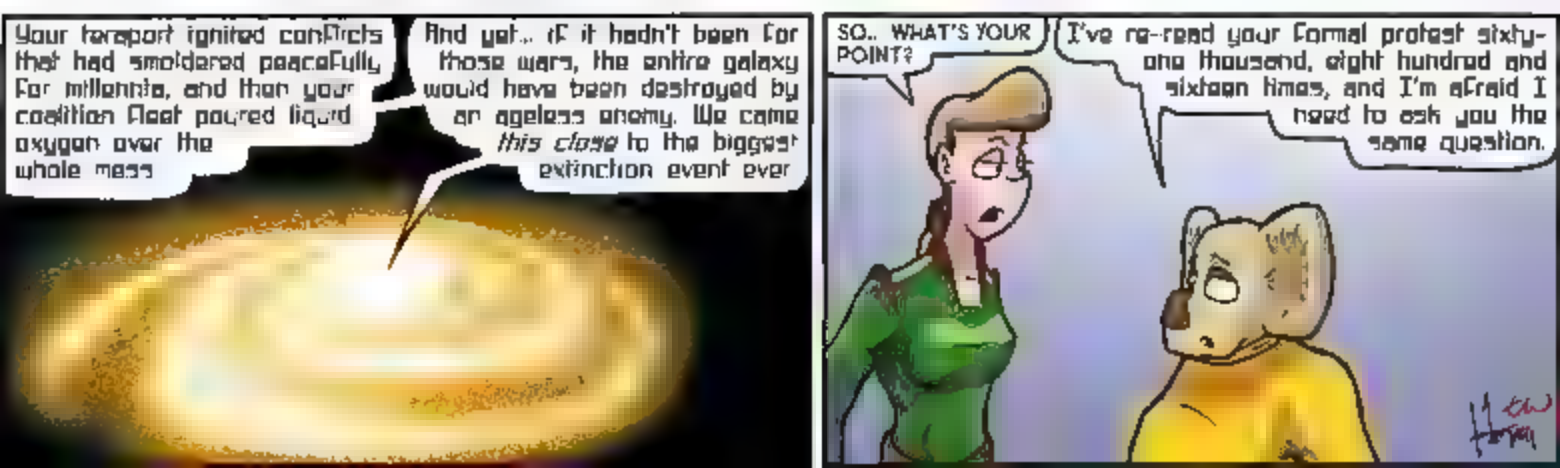

LIEUTENANT YOUR PLATOON'S QUARTERS WILL BE THROUGH HERE.
WE JUST HAD THE ENTIRE SHIP CLEANED AND REFITTED YOU *WILL* HOLD REGULAR INSPECTIONS. I WANT THIS AREA TO LOOK AS NICE EVERY DAY AS IT DOES TODAY
NICER EVEN.
SIR, YES SIR.

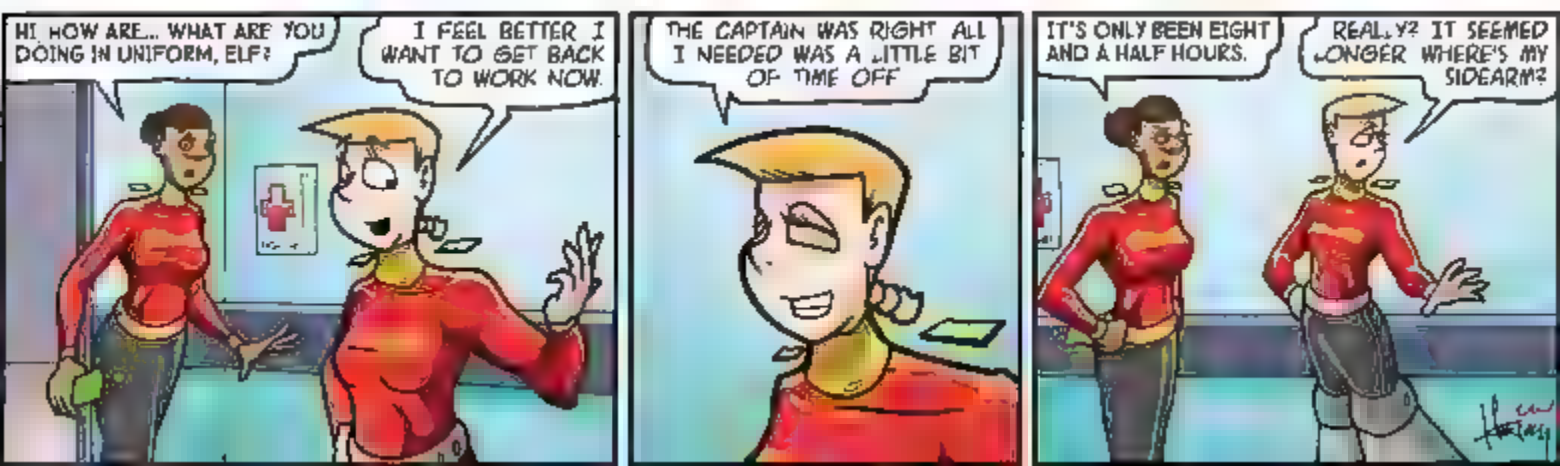

TROOPS, FALL IN BEHIND ME ON THE DOUBLE! WE'VE GOT A CLEANUP DETAIL BEFORE ANYBODY GETS ANY SLEEP
IT SEEMS OUR SHIPWRIGHTS MISSED A SPOT OR TWO WHEN THEY DRAINED THIS DECK.
WHOA. VACATION REALLY IS OVER, AIN'T IT
THINK OF THIS AS JUST ANOTHER REMINDER THAT OUR STUFF ALWAYS COMES FROM THE LOWEST BIDDER
BUT WHY DO WE HAVE TO CLEAN THIS CRAP UP?
I'VE SEEN YOUR PAY STUBS. YOU GRUNTS ARE THE LOWEST BIDDERS OF ALL

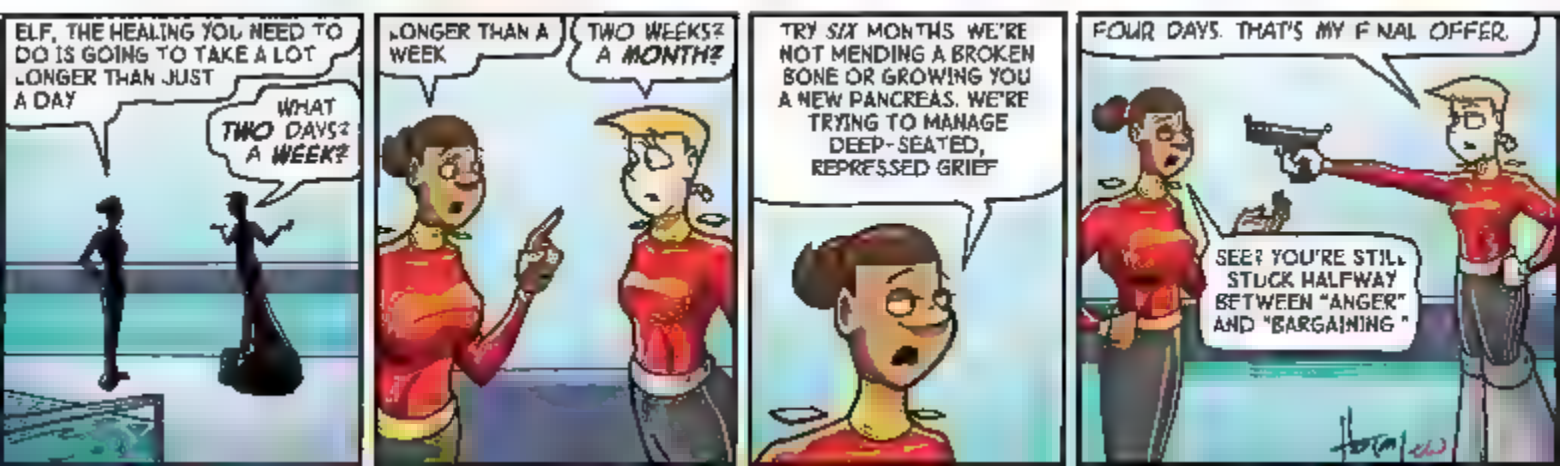

SHODAN'S GOT THE GRUNTS CLEANING UP SO THEY CAN MOVE IN. THE COMMAND STAFF IS ALREADY SETTLED HERE IN THE TOWER
HOW DO YOU WANT TO CORDON OFF THE UNUSED SPACE?
THE SIMPLEST WAY WOULD BE TO HAVE THE A.I LOCK IT DOWN.
PERFECT TAG, TAKE CARE OF THAT. OH, AND HAVE A MESSAGE PREPARED IN CASE ANYBODY ASKS SOMETHING LIKE "WHAT'S BEHIND THIS DOOR?"
SOMETHING SIMPLE BUT TO THE POINT DISCOURAGE CURIOSITY
NOT VERY MUCH LATER
ABANDON HOPE, ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE!
OKAY, LET'S GO DO SOMETHING ELSE, NOW

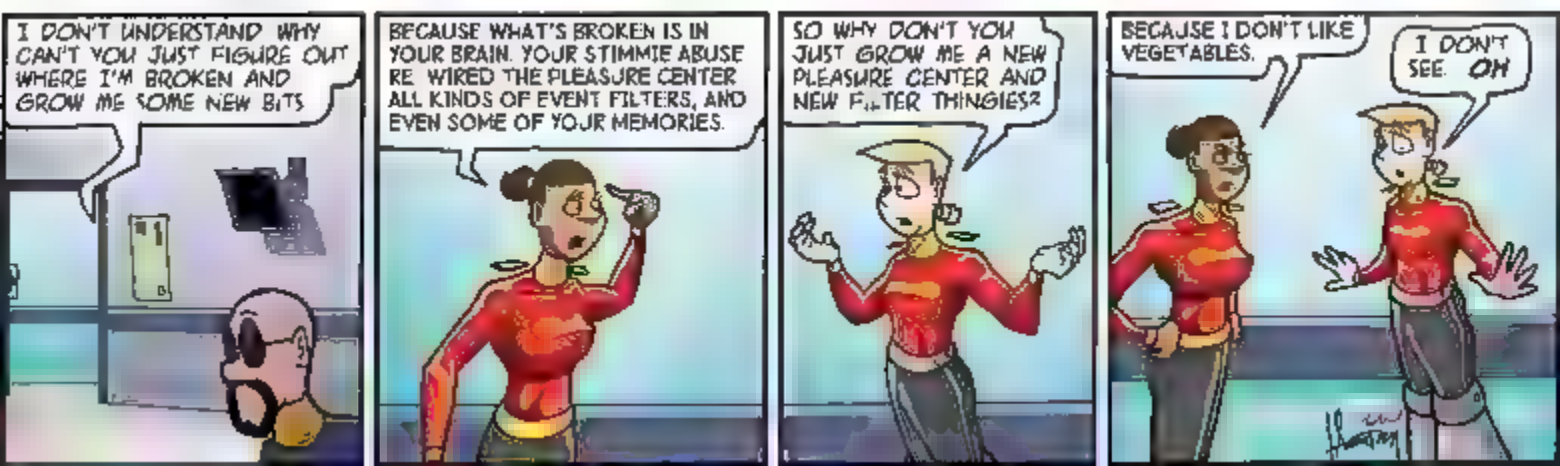
MEANWHILE NEAR THE GALACTIC CORE ABOARD THE FLEETMIND HABITAT PRIME DIRECTIVE
L.N.S. AMBASSADOR BREYA ANDREYASN IS HERE MILORD
Escort her in.
Schlock Mercenary
HELLO, PETEY
Hello, Ambassador
I'M HERE TO LODGE A PROTEST. I'LL LET YOU READ IT YOURSELF. THE FORMAL DOCUMENT USES SOME OF THE STRONGEST WORDS YOU CAN WRITE IN GALSTANDARD WEST WITHOUT VIOLATING GRAMMATICAL CHECKSUM.
Ah, hyperbole. Thank you. I've read it

PRESIDING SECRETARY TOFOTTI MANCALA IS NOT AMUSED WITH THE WAY YOU MEDDLE IN THE AFFAIRS OF SOVEREIGN STATES.
With a name like "Tofotti" you'd think he'd have developed a more robust sense of humor
THIS IS SERIOUS, PETEY. ARE YOU TRYING TO START A PAN-GALACTIC WAR?
Of course not. We just finished one. Do you have *any* idea how many people died as a result of the Teraport Wars?
I . NO, I DON'T
Well I *do*

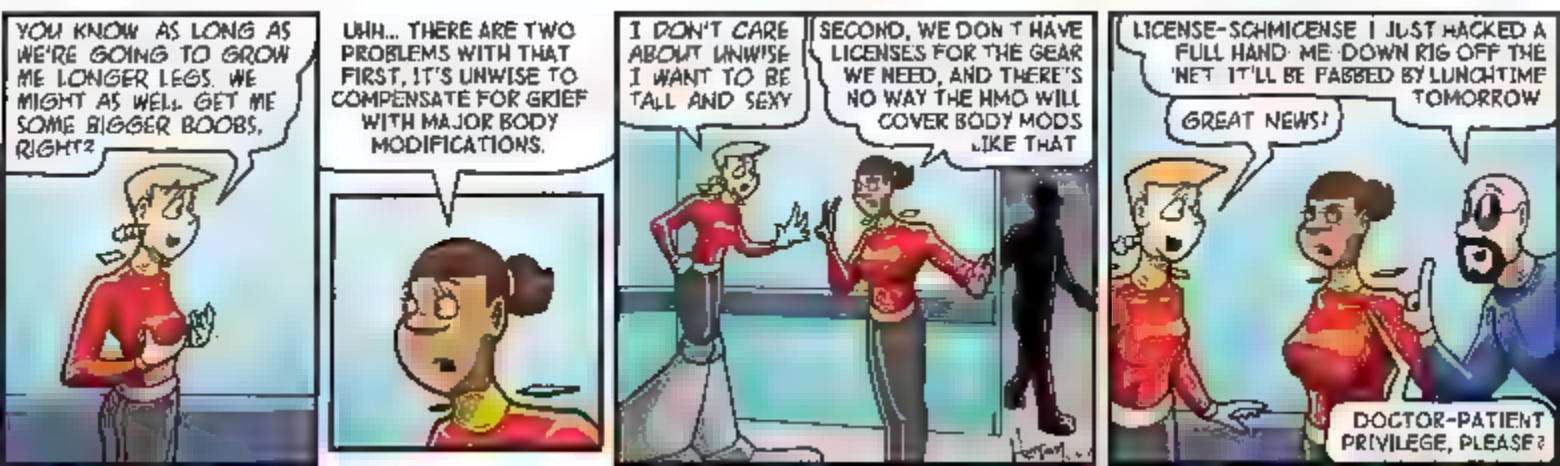

Your teraport ignited conflicts that had smoldered peacefully for millennia, and then your coalition fleet poured liquid oxygen over the whole mess
And yet... if it hadn't been for those wars, the entire galaxy would have been destroyed by an ageless enemy. We came *this close* to the biggest extinction event ever
SO... WHAT'S YOUR POINT?
I've re-read your formal protest sixty-one thousand, eight hundred and sixteen times, and I'm afraid I need to ask you the same question.


HI, HOW ARE... WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN UNIFORM, ELF?
I FEEL BETTER. I WANT TO GET BACK TO WORK NOW.
THE CAPTAIN WAS RIGHT. ALL I NEEDED WAS A LITTLE BIT OF TIME OFF.
IT'S ONLY BEEN EIGHT AND A HALF HOURS.
REALLY? IT SEEMED LONGER. WHERE'S MY SIDEARM?

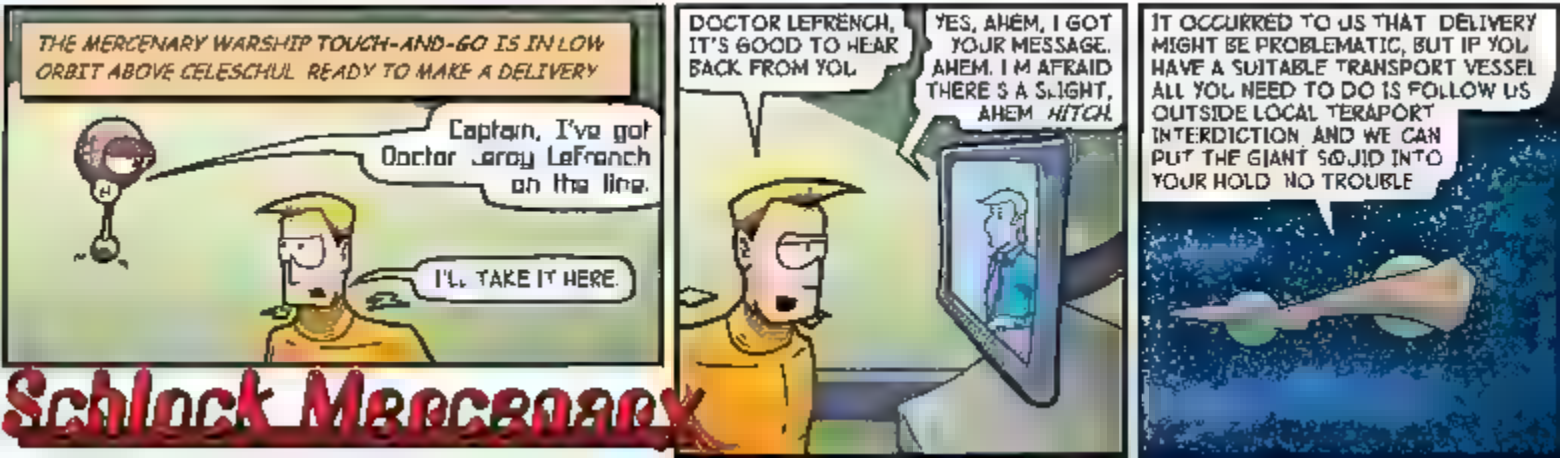

ELF, THE HEALING YOU NEED TO DO IS GOING TO TAKE A LOT LONGER THAN JUST A DAY
WHAT TWO DAYS? A WEEK?
LONGER THAN A WEEK
TWO WEEKS? A MONTH?
TRY SIX MONTHS. WE'RE NOT MENDING A BROKEN BONE OR GROWING YOU A NEW PANCREAS. WE'RE TRYING TO MANAGE DEEP-SEATED, REPRESSED GRIEF
FOUR DAYS. THAT'S MY FINAL OFFER.
SEE? YOU'RE STILL STUCK HALFWAY BETWEEN "ANGER" AND "BARGAINING."

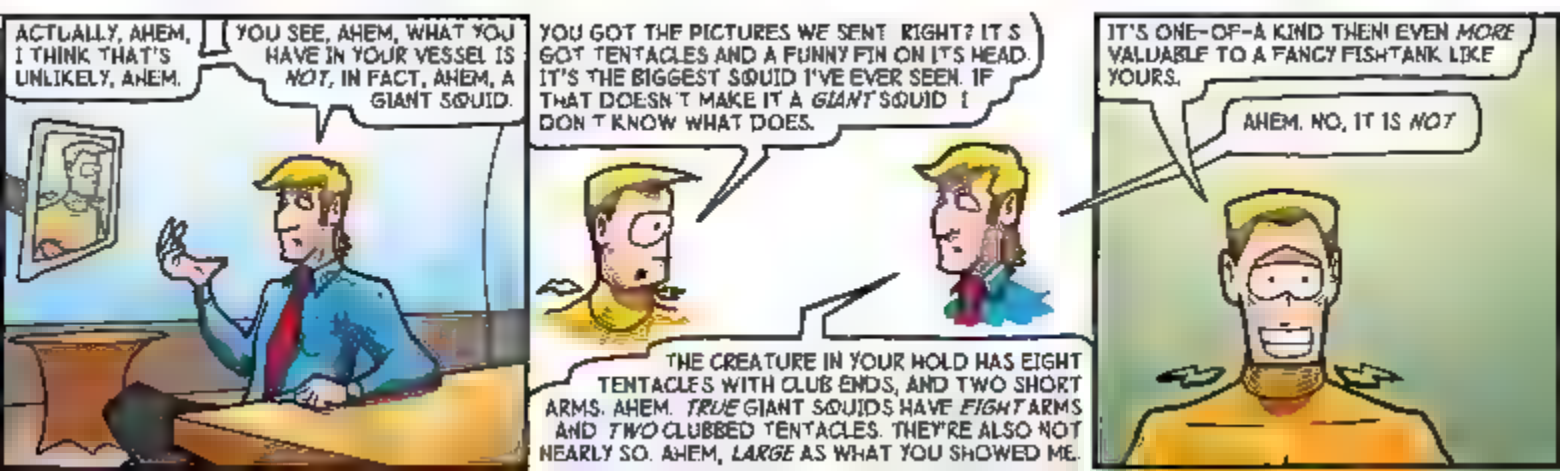

I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY CAN'T YOU JUST FIGURE OUT WHERE I'M BROKEN AND GROW ME SOME NEW BITS
BECAUSE WHAT'S BROKEN IS IN YOUR BRAIN. YOUR STIMMIE ABUSE RE WIRED THE PLEASURE CENTER ALL KINDS OF EVENT FILTERS, AND EVEN SOME OF YOUR MEMORIES.
SO WHY DON'T YOU JUST GROW ME A NEW PLEASURE CENTER AND NEW FILTER THINGIES?
BECAUSE I DON'T LIKE VEGETABLES.
I DON'T SEE. OH

WHAT ABOUT NEW LEGS? CAN YOU GROW ME SOME NEW LEGS?
I THOUGHT YOU LIKED THE GIANT PROSTHETICS.
WELL... I LIKE BEING TALL. I FIGURE IF YOU GROW ME NEW LEGS, YOU COULD MAKE 'EM A LITTLE... YOU KNOW. EXTRA-LONG?
HMMM... HAVE YOU EVER CUT OR COLORED YOUR HAIR WHILE YOU WERE IN A BAD MOOD?
OF COURSE NOT. I'M NOT STUPID.
WELL THAT'S GOOD TO HEAR.

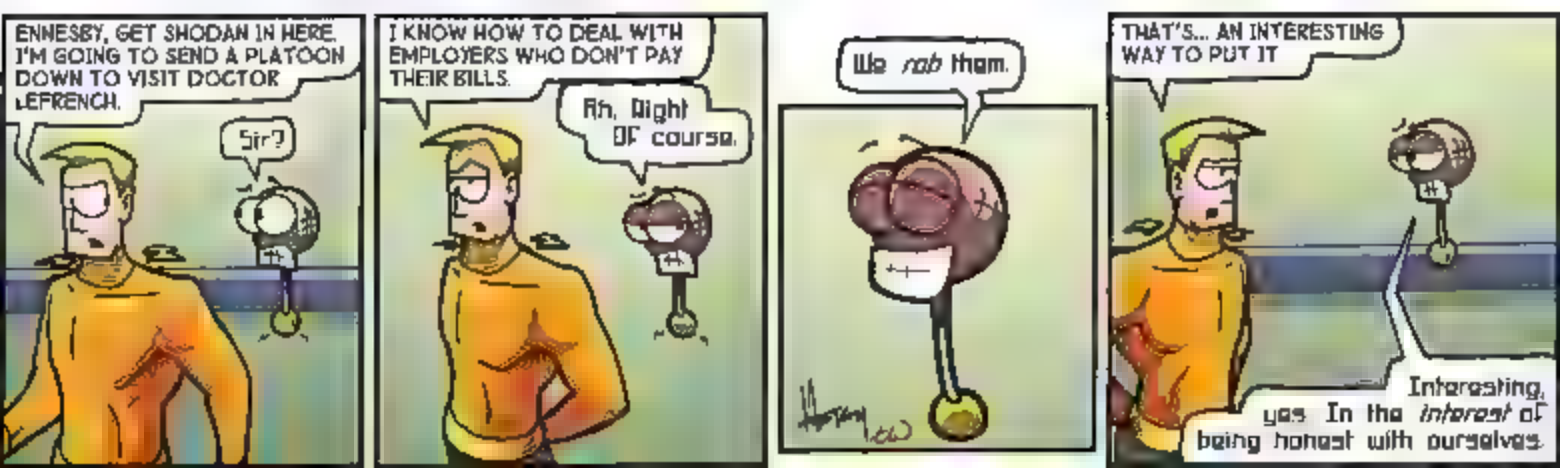

YOU KNOW AS LONG AS WE'RE GOING TO GROW ME LONGER LEGS. WE MIGHT AS WELL GET ME SOME BIGGER BOOBS, RIGHT?
UHH... THERE ARE TWO PROBLEMS WITH THAT FIRST, IT'S UNWISE TO COMPENSATE FOR GRIEF WITH MAJOR BODY MODIFICATIONS.
I DON'T CARE ABOUT UNWISE I WANT TO BE TALL AND SEXY
SECOND, WE DON'T HAVE LICENSES FOR THE GEAR WE NEED, AND THERE'S NO WAY THE HMO WILL COVER BODY MODS LIKE THAT
LICENSE-SCHMICENSE I JUST HACKED A FULL HAND-ME-DOWN RIG OFF THE 'NET IT'LL BE FABBED BY LUNCHTIME TOMORROW
GREAT NEWS!
DOCTOR-PATIENT PRIVILEGE, PLEASE?

SORRY TO INTERRUPT. I OVERHEARD A LITTLE... CAN I MAKE A COMMENT?
PLEASE DON'T
ELF, MAKING YOU TALL AND SEXY WOULD BE A BAD IDEA. NOBODY WANTS YOU TO LOOK LIKE DOCTOR BUNNIGUS.
THE COMPANY WOULD BE UNBALANCED. WE NEED THE TOUGH, TINY TOMGIRL TO OFFSET THE CHOCOLATE BOMBSHELL
YOU KNOW THIS ANGER MANAGEMENT THING IS OKAY
YEAH, THAT WAS THERAPEUTIC.
MEDIC

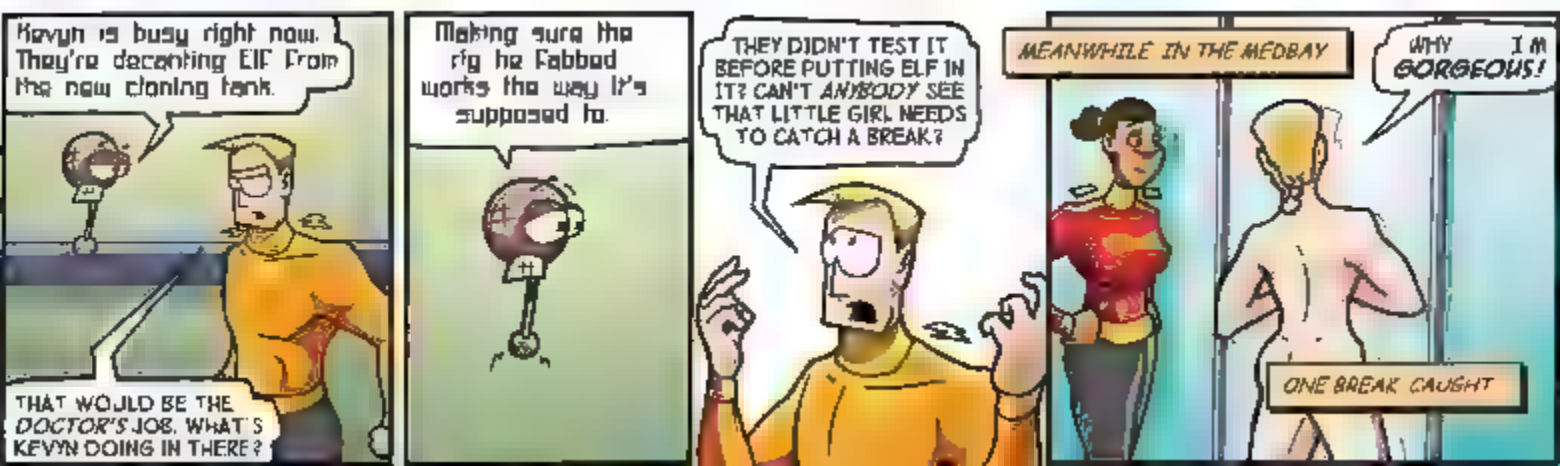

THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH-AND-GO IS IN LOW ORBIT ABOVE CELESCHUL READY TO MAKE A DELIVERY
Captain, I've got Doctor Jeroy LeFrench on the line.
I'LL TAKE IT HERE.
DOCTOR LEFRENCH, IT'S GOOD TO HEAR BACK FROM YOU.
YES, AHEM, I GOT YOUR MESSAGE. AHEM. I M AFRAID THERE S A SLIGHT, AHEM HITCH.
IT OCCURRED TO US THAT DELIVERY MIGHT BE PROBLEMATIC, BUT IF YOU HAVE A SUITABLE TRANSPORT VESSEL ALL YOU NEED TO DO IS FOLLOW US OUTSIDE LOCAL TERAPORT INTERDICTION AND WE CAN PUT THE GIANT SQUID INTO YOUR HOLD NO TROUBLE
Schlock Mercenary

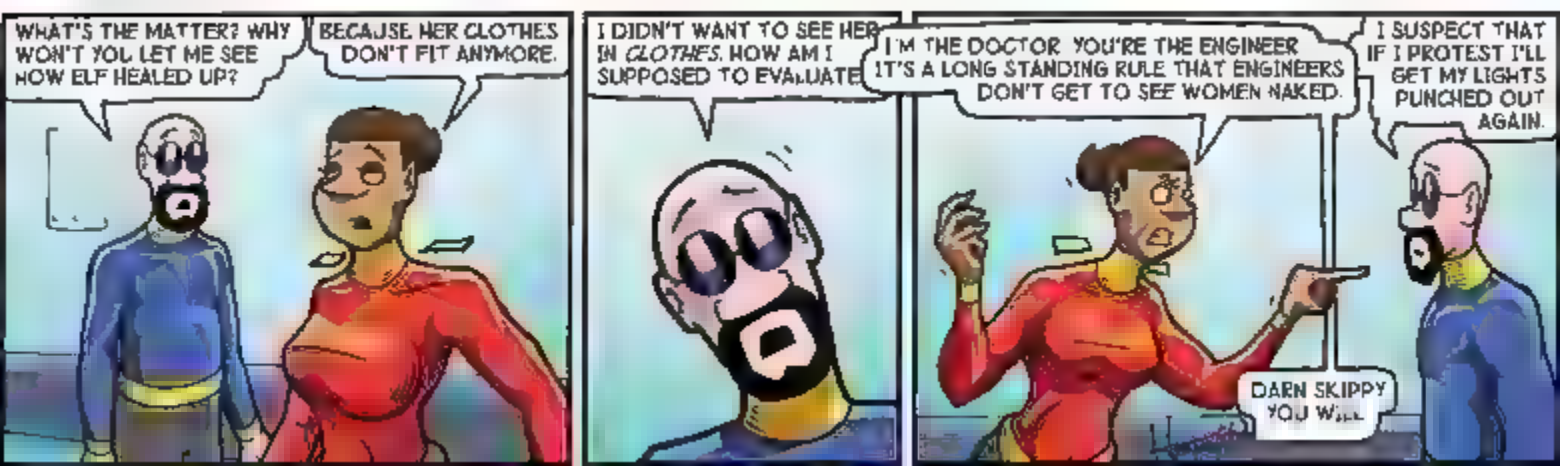

ACTUALLY, AHEM, I THINK THAT'S UNLIKELY, AHEM.
YOU SEE, AHEM, WHAT YOU HAVE IN YOUR VESSEL IS *NOT*, IN FACT, AHEM, A GIANT SQUID.
YOU GOT THE PICTURES WE SENT RIGHT? IT'S GOT TENTACLES AND A FUNNY FIN ON IT'S HEAD. IT'S THE BIGGEST SQUID I'VE EVER SEEN. IF THAT DOESN'T MAKE IT A *GIANT* SQUID I DON'T KNOW WHAT DOES.
THE CREATURE IN YOUR HOLD HAS EIGHT TENTACLES WITH CLUB ENDS, AND TWO SHORT ARMS. AHEM. *TRUE* GIANT SQUIDS HAVE *EIGHT* ARMS AND *TWO* CLUBBED TENTACLES. THEY'RE ALSO NOT NEARLY SO. AHEM, *LARGE* AS WHAT YOU SHOWED ME.
IT'S ONE-OF-A KIND THEN! EVEN *MORE* VALUABLE TO A FANCY FISHTANK LIKE YOURS.
AHEM. NO, IT IS *NOT*

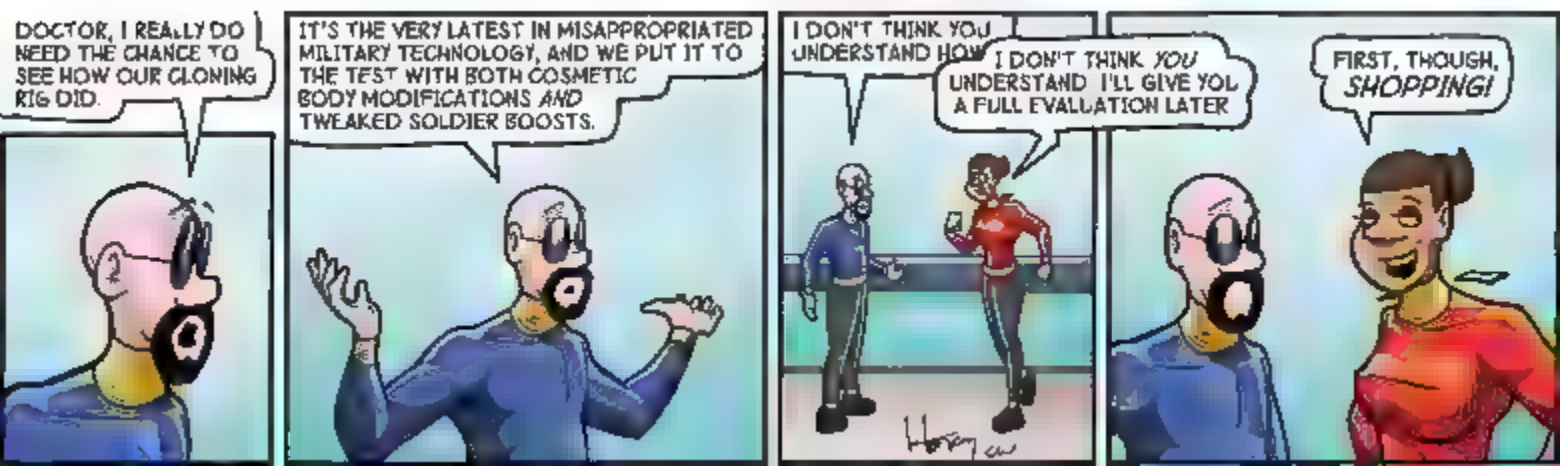
NOT UNIQUE? OR NOT VALUABLE?
NOT *EITHER*. AHEM. I DID SOME RESEARCH WHEN I SAW THOSE PICTURES.
WHAT YOU HAVE THERE IS AHEM, A PROTOTYPE ROCKHOUND PILOT, AHEM, COOKED UP FROM NINE-HUNDRED-YEAR OLD ENGINEERED GENE SEQUENCES.
AHEM. AND WE DON'T WANT IT. GOOD DAY TO YOU.
THIS WAS YOUR IDEA, *ADJUTANT*
Oooh, I hear paperwork calling

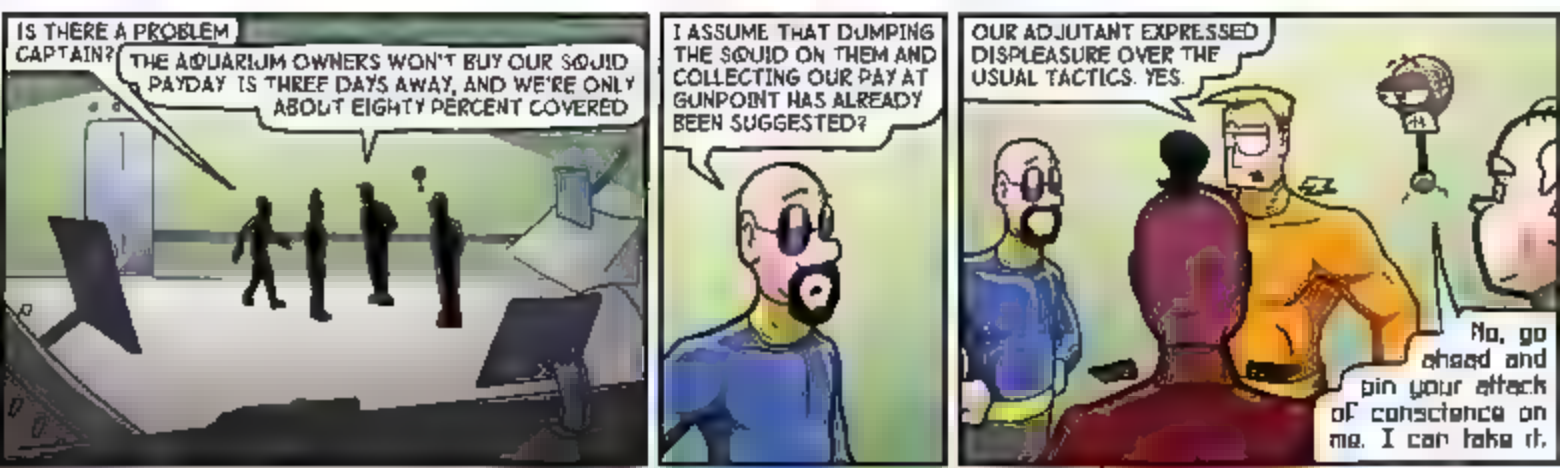

ENNESBY, GET SHODAN IN HERE. I'M GOING TO SEND A PLATOON DOWN TO VISIT DOCTOR LEFRENCH.
Sir?
I KNOW HOW TO DEAL WITH EMPLOYERS WHO DON'T PAY THEIR BILLS.
Ah, Right OF course.
We rob them.
THAT'S... AN INTERESTING WAY TO PUT IT
Interesting, yes. In the interest of being honest with ourselves.

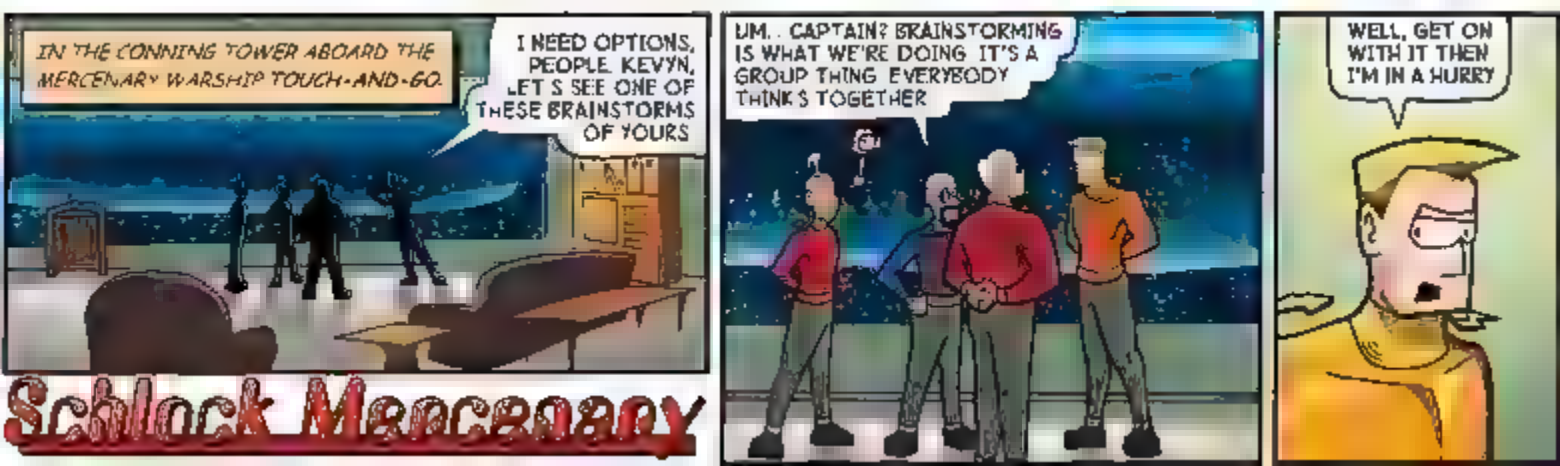
GET KEVYN IN HERE. I NEED SOME OPTIONS, AND BETWEEN YOU AND ME WE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH BRAINS
Between you and me we've barely got *half* a brain.
Granted, that's not *my* fault, since what I think with isn't technically a brain at all.
... aaand what you've got upstairs isn't in the mood for witty repartee, I see.
I'M IN THE MOOD FOR MAKING PAYROLL OR KILLING ROBOTS. HELP ME CHOOSE.


Kevyn is busy right now. They're decanting ELF from the new cloning tank.
THAT WOULD BE THE DOCTOR'S JOB. WHAT'S KEVYN DOING IN THERE?
Making sure the rig he fabbed works the way it's supposed to.
THEY DIDN'T TEST IT BEFORE PUTTING ELF IN IT? CAN'T ANYBODY SEE THAT LITTLE GIRL NEEDS TO CATCH A BREAK?
MEANWHILE IN THE MEDBAY
WHY I AM GORGEOUS!
ONE BREAK CAUGHT


WHAT'S THE MATTER? WHY WON'T YOU LET ME SEE HOW ELF HEALED UP?
BECAUSE HER CLOTHES DON'T FIT ANYMORE.
I DIDN'T WANT TO SEE HER IN *CLOTHES*. HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO EVALUATE
I'M THE DOCTOR. YOU'RE THE ENGINEER. IT'S A LONG STANDING RULE THAT ENGINEERS DON'T GET TO SEE WOMEN NAKED.
I SUSPECT THAT IF I PROTEST I'LL GET MY LIGHTS PUNCHED OUT AGAIN.
DARN SKIPPY YOU WILL


DOCTOR, I REALLY DO NEED THE CHANCE TO SEE HOW OUR CLONING RIG DID.
IT'S THE VERY LATEST IN MISAPPROPRIATED MILITARY TECHNOLOGY, AND WE PUT IT TO THE TEST WITH BOTH COSMETIC BODY MODIFICATIONS *AND* TWEAKED SOLDIER BOOSTS.
I DON'T THINK YOU UNDERSTAND HOW
I DON'T THINK *YOU* UNDERSTAND I'LL GIVE YOU A FULL EVALUATION LATER
FIRST, THOUGH, *SHOPPING!*


IS THERE A PROBLEM CAPTAIN?
THE AQUARIUM OWNERS WON'T BUY OUR SQUID PAYDAY IS THREE DAYS AWAY, AND WE'RE ONLY ABOUT EIGHTY PERCENT COVERED
I ASSUME THAT DUMPING THE SQUID ON THEM AND COLLECTING OUR PAY AT GUNPOINT HAS ALREADY BEEN SUGGESTED?
OUR ADJUTANT EXPRESSED DISPLEASURE OVER THE USUAL TACTICS. YES.
No, go ahead and pin your attack of conscience on me. I can take it.


IN THE CONNING TOWER ABOARD THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH-AND-GO.
I NEED OPTIONS, PEOPLE. KEVYN, LET'S SEE ONE OF THESE BRAINSTORMS OF YOURS
UM... CAPTAIN? BRAINSTORMING IS WHAT WE'RE DOING. IT'S A GROUP THING. EVERYBODY THINKS TOGETHER.
WELL, GET ON WITH IT THEN. I'M IN A HURRY.
Schlock Mercenary

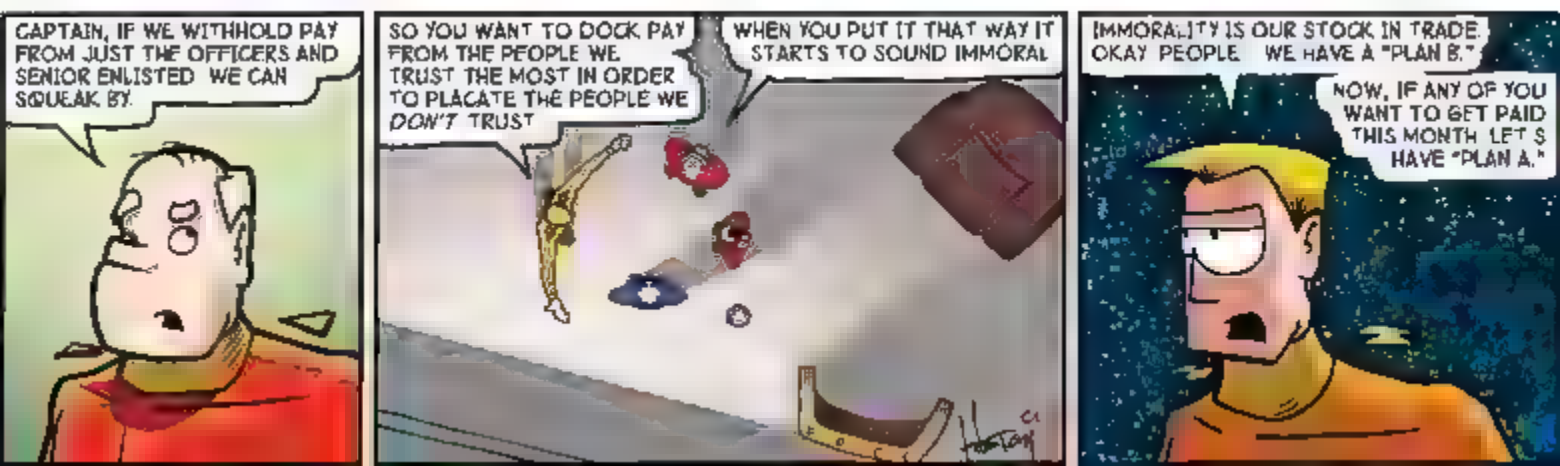
We could just skip this round of paychecks and tell everybody we need to find customers.

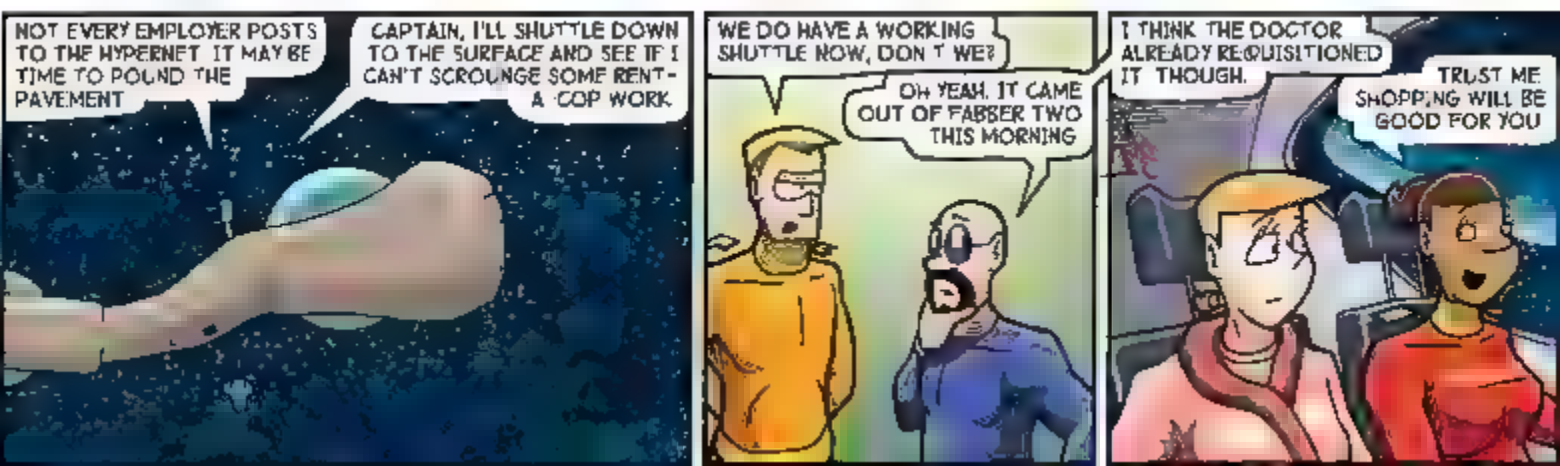
BRASH, BUT IT IS AN OPTION

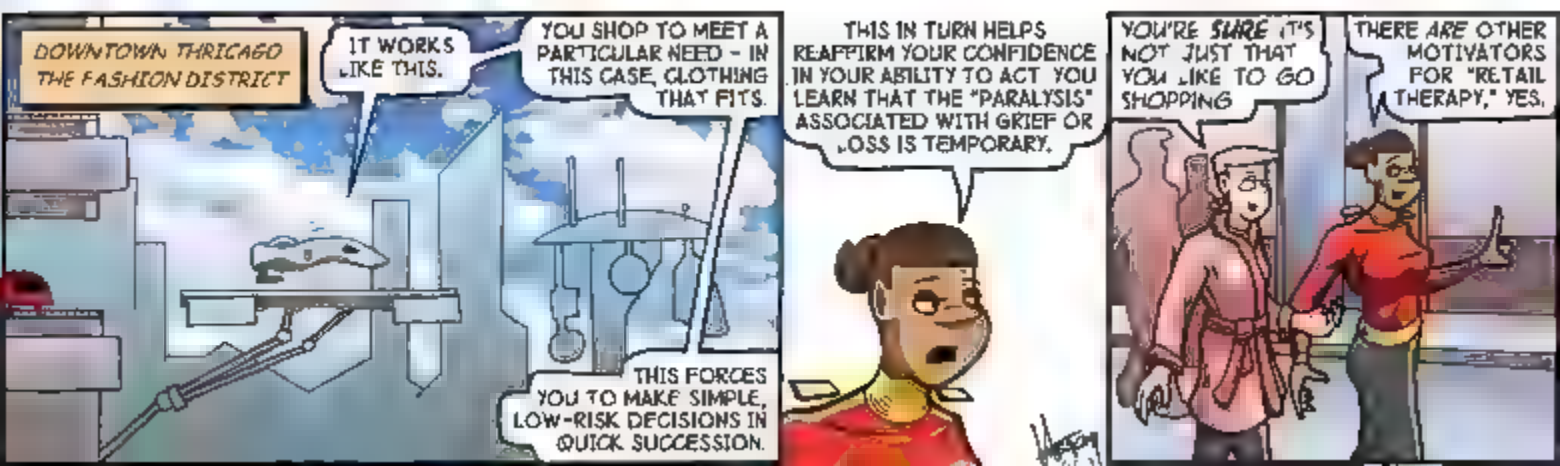
DO YOU REMEMBER HOW I REACTED WHEN DOCTOR LEFRENCH STIFFED US? MULTIPLY THAT BY FIFTY AND USE LESS RESTRAINT

DO YOU REALLY THINK SO? EVEN AMONG MERCHANTERS MUTINY IS A SERIOUS OFFENSE

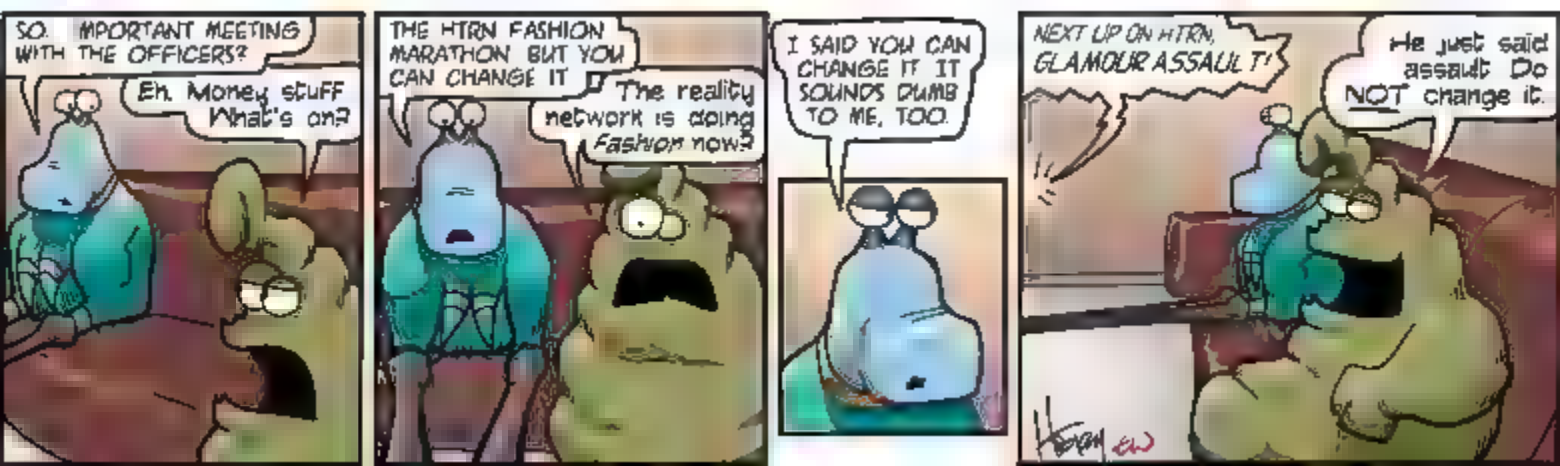
AMONG MERCENARIES SO IS NOT MAKING PAYROLL

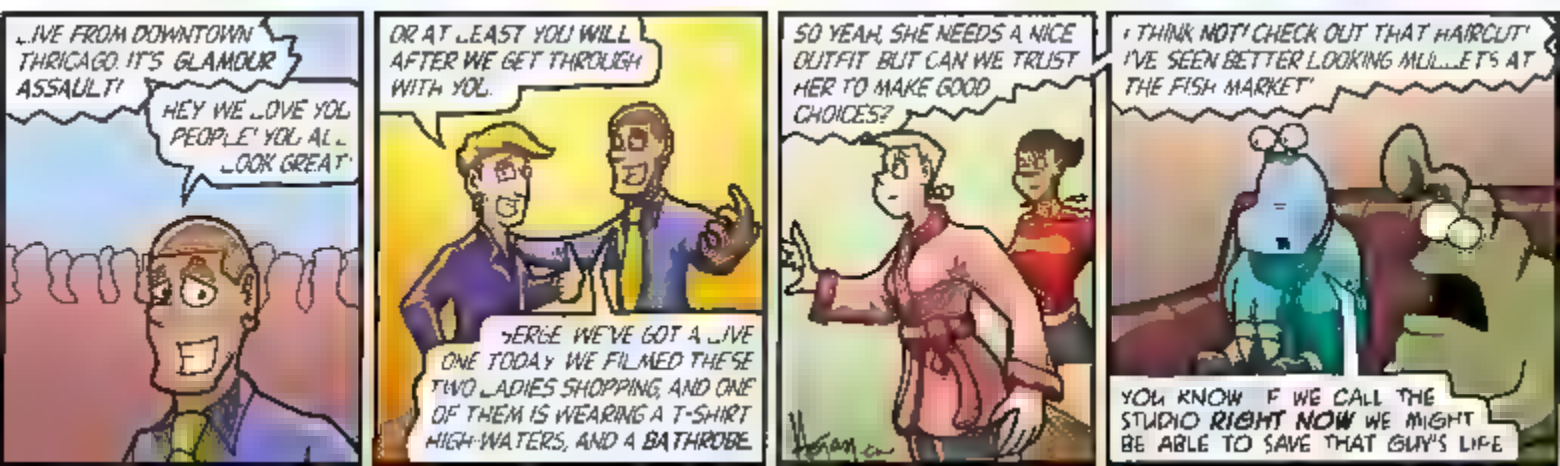

CAPTAIN, IF WE WITHHOLD PAY FROM JUST THE OFFICERS AND SENIOR ENLISTED WE CAN SQUEAK BY.
SO YOU WANT TO DOCK PAY FROM THE PEOPLE WE TRUST THE MOST IN ORDER TO PLACATE THE PEOPLE WE *DON'T* TRUST
WHEN YOU PUT IT THAT WAY IT STARTS TO SOUND IMMORAL
IMMORALITY IS OUR STOCK IN TRADE. OKAY PEOPLE WE HAVE A "PLAN B."
NOW, IF ANY OF YOU WANT TO GET PAID THIS MONTH LET'S HAVE "PLAN A."


NOT EVERY EMPLOYER POSTS TO THE HYPERNET. IT MAY BE TIME TO POUND THE PAVEMENT.
CAPTAIN, I'LL SHUTTLE DOWN TO THE SURFACE AND SEE IF I CAN'T SCROUNGE SOME RENT-A-COP WORK.
WE DO HAVE A WORKING SHUTTLE NOW, DON'T WE?
OH YEAH. IT CAME OUT OF FABBER TWO THIS MORNING.
I THINK THE DOCTOR ALREADY REQUISITIONED IT, THOUGH.
TRUST ME. SHOPPING WILL BE GOOD FOR YOU.


DOWNTOWN THRICAGO
THE FASHION DISTRICT
IT WORKS LIKE THIS.
YOU SHOP TO MEET A PARTICULAR NEED - IN THIS CASE, CLOTHING THAT FITS.
THIS FORCES YOU TO MAKE SIMPLE, LOW-RISK DECISIONS IN QUICK SUCCESSION.
THIS IN TURN HELPS REAFFIRM YOUR CONFIDENCE IN YOUR ABILITY TO ACT. YOU LEARN THAT THE "PARALYSIS" ASSOCIATED WITH GRIEF OR LOSS IS TEMPORARY.
YOU'RE SURE IT'S NOT JUST THAT YOU LIKE TO GO SHOPPING
THERE ARE OTHER MOTIVATORS FOR "RETAIL THERAPY," YES.

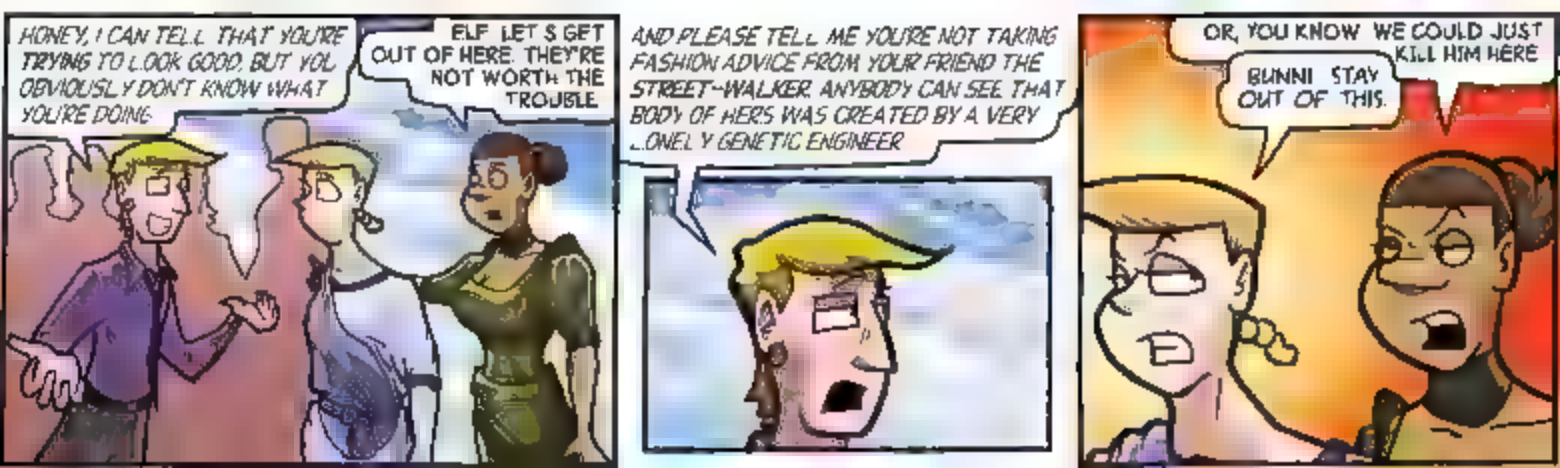
LOOK AROUND, PEOPLE. YOU'RE THE OFFICERS AND SENIOR ENLISTED IN THIS COMPANY I TRUST EACH OF YOU.
WE'RE GOING TO BE SHORT ON PAYDAY, AND IF YOU'RE IN THIS ROOM, THAT MEANS YOU WON'T BE GETTING PAID THIS TIME.
NONE OF THE OFFICERS WILL BE WE GOT STIFFED ON THE LAST JOB SO WE RE SCRAMBLING TO FIND PAYING CUSTOMERS RIGHT NOW
YOU SAID "IN THIS ROOM." WHAT ABOUT THE DOC, AND ELF? THEY'RE OFFICERS TOO.
THEY'RE IN THE SAME BOAT WE'RE IN.
IT LOOKS SO EXPENSIVE.
HEY PAYDAY IS JUST AROUND THE CORNER.
THEY JUST DON'T KNOW IT YET


SO. IMPORTANT MEETING WITH THE OFFICERS?
Eh. Money stuff What's on?
THE HTRN FASHION MARATHON BUT YOU CAN CHANGE IT
The reality network is doing Fashion now?
I SAID YOU CAN CHANGE IT IT SOUNDS DUMB TO ME, TOO.
NEXT UP ON HTRN, GLAMOUR ASSAULT!
He just said assault Do NOT change it.


LIVE FROM DOWNTOWN THRICAGO. IT'S GLAMOUR ASSAULT!
HEY WE LOVE YOU PEOPLE! YOU ALL LOOK GREAT!
OR AT LEAST YOU WILL AFTER WE GET THROUGH WITH YOU.
SERGE WE'VE GOT A LIVE ONE TODAY WE FILMED THESE TWO LADIES SHOPPING, AND ONE OF THEM IS WEARING A T-SHIRT HIGH-WATERS, AND A BATHROBE.
SO YEAH, SHE NEEDS A NICE OUTFIT BUT CAN WE TRUST HER TO MAKE GOOD CHOICES?
I THINK NOT! CHECK OUT THAT HAIRCUT! I'VE SEEN BETTER LOOKING MULLETS AT THE FISH MARKET!
YOU KNOW IF WE CALL THE STUDIO RIGHT NOW WE MIGHT BE ABLE TO SAVE THAT GUY'S LIFE

Captaaain! Elf is in trouble!
WHAT? WHAT'S THE MATTER?
I guess she went shopping, and this reality show saw her and is gonna make fun of her haircut and her clothes, and the studio lines are all busy, and she is gonna kill somebody!
IF WE NEED TO DO AN EXTRACTION, WE'LL HAVE TO WAIT UNTIL THE ARMOR SQUADRON IS READY ANYWAY.

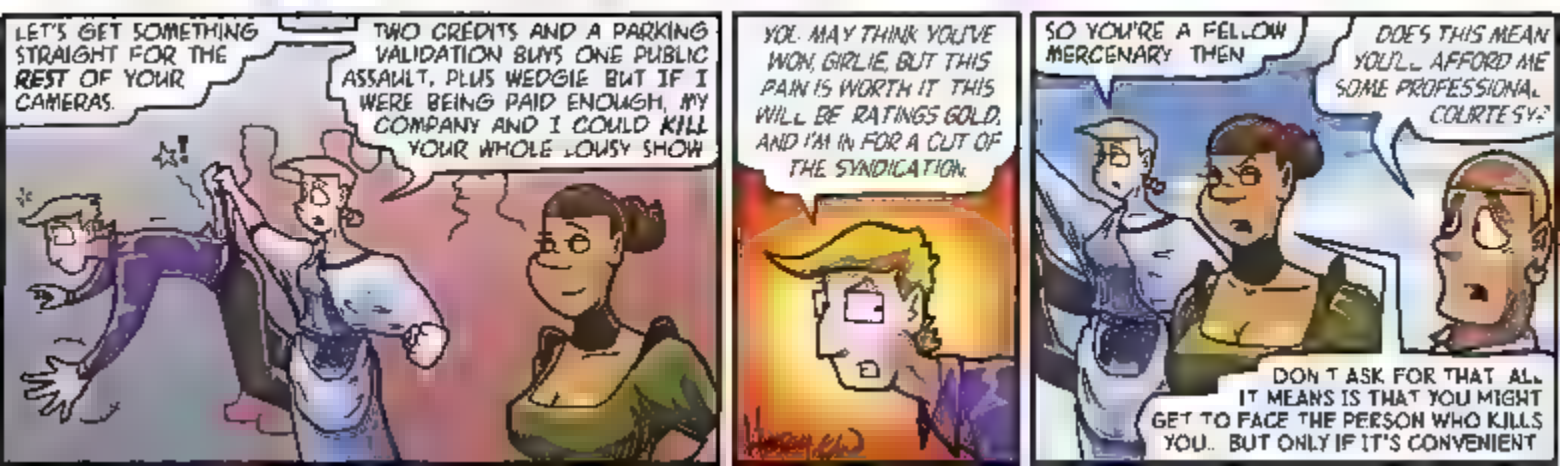
DOWNTOWN THRICAGO. GLAMOUR ASSAULT IN PROGRESS
WHOA, LADIES' LOOKIN' SHARP!
DID YOU JUST BUY THAT OUTFIT?
YEAH. YOU LIKE IT?
OH YEAH! JUST NOT ON YOU, BABY. WHO CUTS YOUR HAIR?
WAIT, WHAT?
YOUR HAIR! WHO CUTS IT? THE CREW-MULLET HAS GONE OUT OF STYLE SO MANY TIMES IN THE LAST THOUSAND YEARS, IT NEVER REALLY WAS IN STYLE
Schlock Mercenary

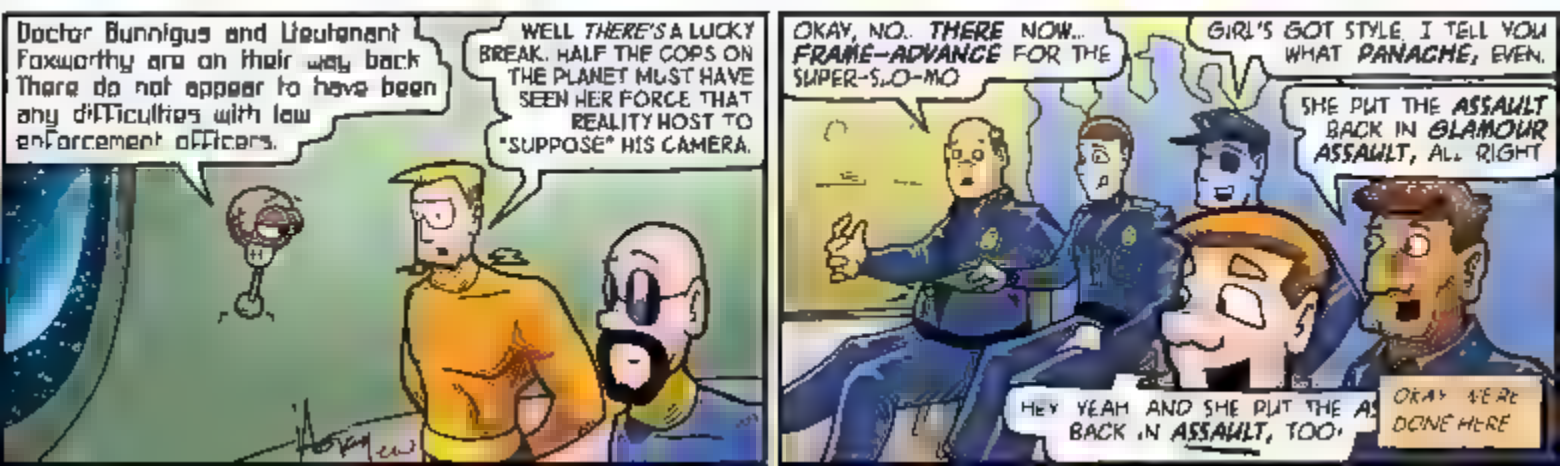

HONEY, I CAN TELL THAT YOU'RE TRYING TO LOOK GOOD, BUT YOU OBVIOUSLY DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING
ELF LET'S GET OUT OF HERE. THEY'RE NOT WORTH THE TROUBLE
AND PLEASE TELL ME YOU'RE NOT TAKING FASHION ADVICE FROM YOUR FRIEND THE STREET-WALKER. ANYBODY CAN SEE THAT BODY OF HERS WAS CREATED BY A VERY LONELY GENETIC ENGINEER
OR, YOU KNOW WE COULD JUST KILL HIM HERE
BUNNI STAY OUT OF THIS.

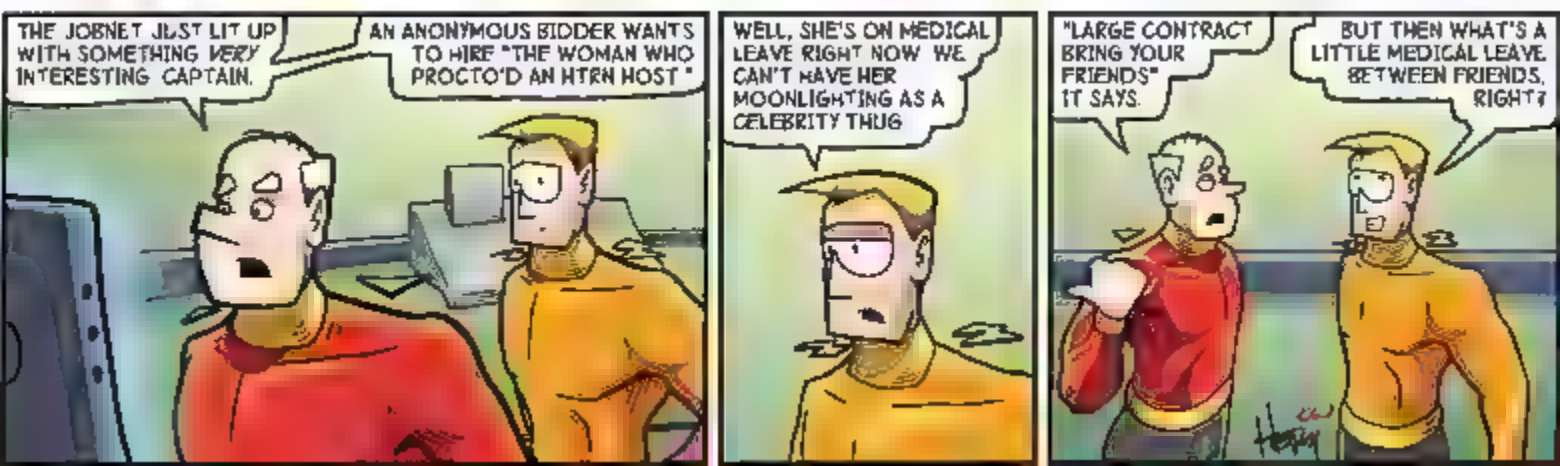
LEMME TELL YOU SOMETHING ABOUT MY HAIRCUT, PAL YES, I CUT IT MYSELF
IT NEEDS TO BE SHORT BECAUSE I CAN'T HAVE IT IN MY WAY DURING COMBAT YOU SEE, I'M A MERCENARY A PROFESSIONAL KILLER
TODAY'S YOUR LUCKY DAY, THOUGH I'M OFF THE CLOCK I'M GOING TO LET YOU LIVE BECAUSE THERE'S NO MONEY IN KILLING YOU
WHOA, EASY WITH THE THREATS THERE, GIRL Y' YOU'RE ON CAMERA RIGHT NOW! IT'S GLAMOUR ASSAULT!

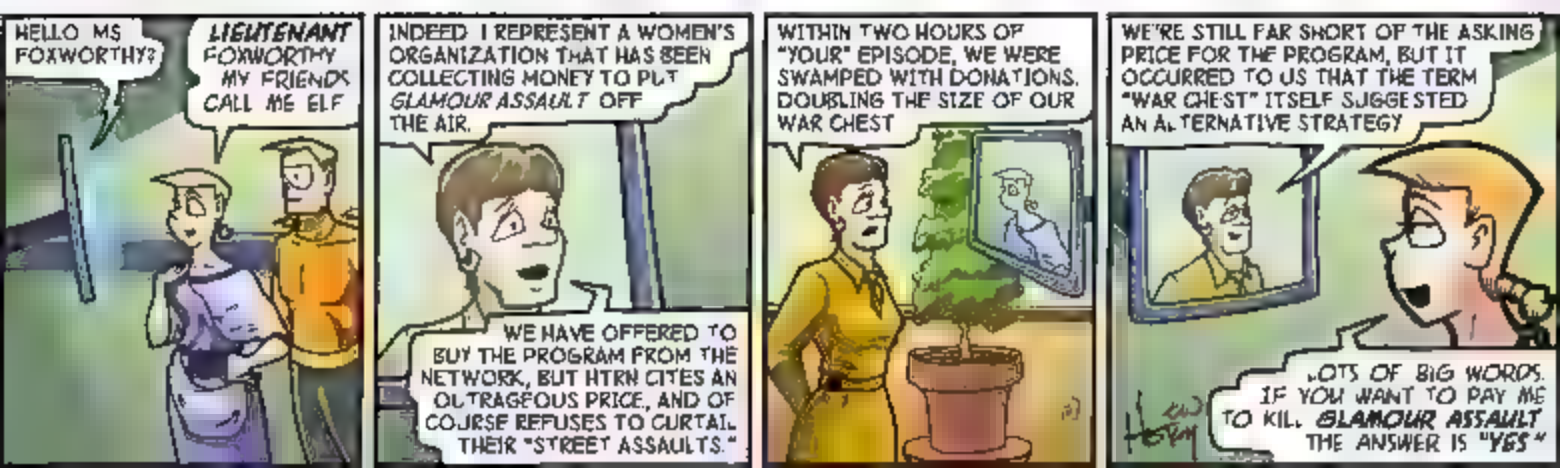
REALLY? TELEVISION? WHERE'S THE CAMERA?
THAT'S RIGHT. THEY ALL WANNA MAKE LOVE TO THE LENS IN THE END.
WE'VE GOT THREE REMOTES, AND ONE RIGHT HERE IN MY TIE TACK.
SMILE FOR THE WORLD, SWEET
THAT'S ALL I NEEDED TO KNOW, THANK YOU.
OKAY, NO MORE LIVE FEED FROM CAMERA ONE.
LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE: WE CAN SELL THAT FOOTAGE TO "PROCTOLOGICAL AMBUSH."

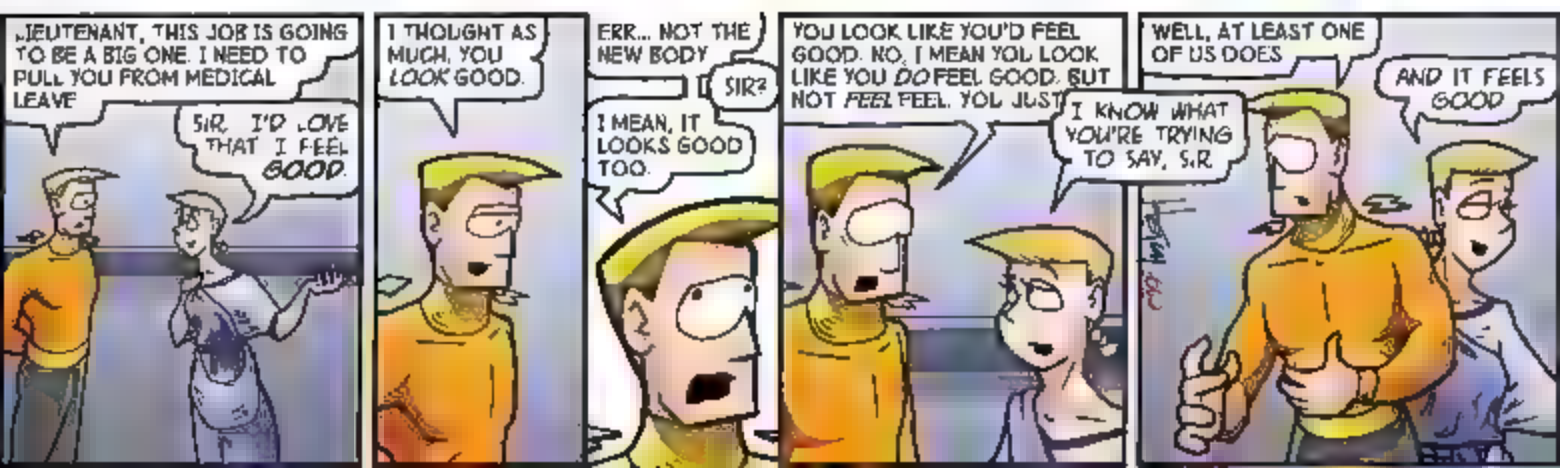
YOU... YOU SHOVED THAT CAMERA CLEAR UP MY
AS I WAS SAYING
I ONLY DO VIOLENCE FOR MONEY TECHNICALLY, I SHOULDA BEEN PAID FOR PUTTING YOUR CAMERA UP THERE
ELF? HERE'S TWO CREDS AND A PARKING VALIDATION. IT'S ALL THE CASH I'VE GOT
I DON'T HAVE ANY CHANGE. SHOULD I GIVE HIM A WEDGIE?
HIS PANTS DO NEED TO BE PULLED BACK.
JP YES.

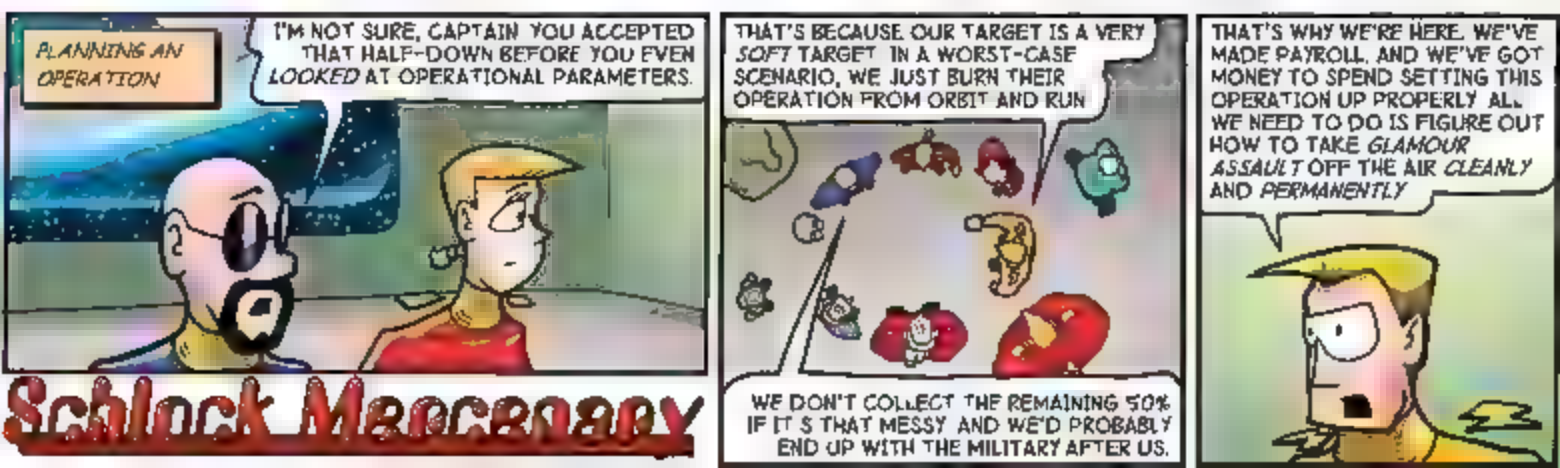

LET'S GET SOMETHING STRAIGHT FOR THE REST OF YOUR CAMERAS.
TWO CREDITS AND A PARKING VALIDATION BUYS ONE PUBLIC ASSAULT, PLUS WEDGIE BUT IF I WERE BEING PAID ENOUGH, MY COMPANY AND I COULD KILL YOUR WHOLE LOUSY SHOW
YOU MAY THINK YOU'VE WON, GIRLIE, BUT THIS PAIN IS WORTH IT. THIS WILL BE RATINGS GOLD, AND I'M IN FOR A CUT OF THE SYNDICATION.
SO YOU'RE A FELLOW MERCENARY THEN
DOES THIS MEAN YOU'LL AFFORD ME SOME PROFESSIONAL COURTESY?
DON'T ASK FOR THAT. ALL IT MEANS IS THAT YOU MIGHT GET TO FACE THE PERSON WHO KILLS YOU... BUT ONLY IF IT'S CONVENIENT

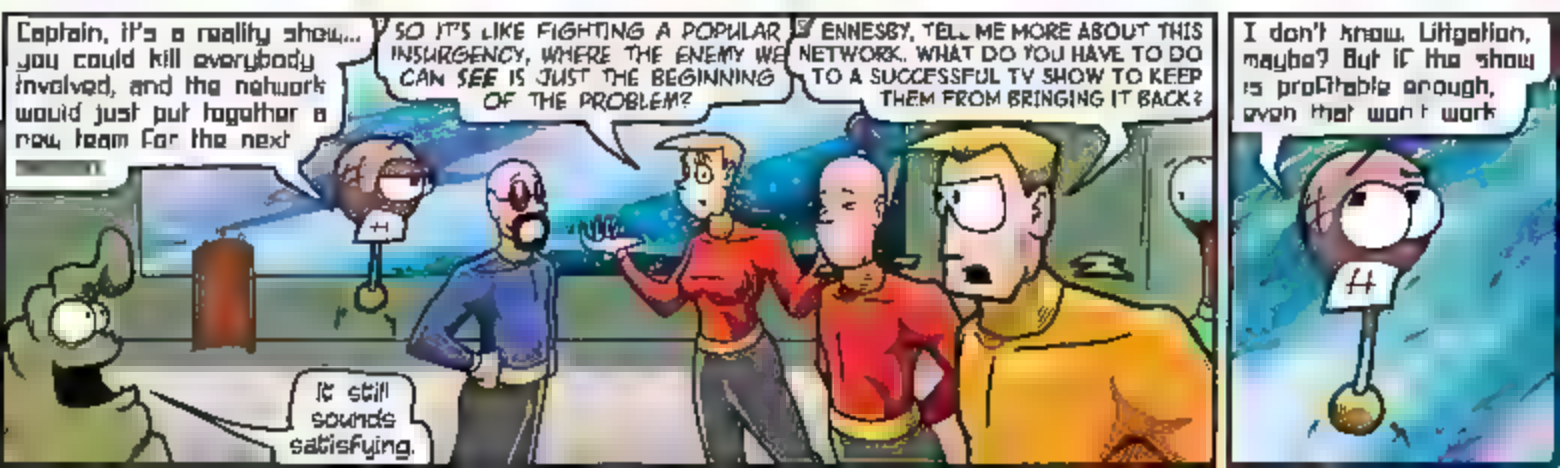

Doctor Bunnigus and Lieutenant Foxworthy are on their way back. There do not appear to have been any difficulties with law enforcement officers.
WELL THERE'S A LUCKY BREAK. HALF THE COPS ON THE PLANET MUST HAVE SEEN HER FORCE THAT REALITY HOST TO "SUPPOSE" HIS CAMERA.
OKAY, NO.. THERE NOW... FRAME-ADVANCE FOR THE SUPER-S.L.O-MO
GIRL'S GOT STYLE. I TELL YOU WHAT PANACHE, EVEN.
SHE PUT THE ASSAULT BACK IN GLAMOUR ASSAULT, ALL RIGHT
HEY YEAH AND SHE PUT THE AS BACK IN ASSAULT, TOO!
OKAY WE'RE DONE HERE


THE JOBNET JUST LIT UP WITH SOMETHING *VERY* INTERESTING CAPTAIN.
AN ANONYMOUS BIDDER WANTS TO HIRE "THE WOMAN WHO PROCTO'D AN HTRN HOST."
WELL, SHE'S ON MEDICAL LEAVE RIGHT NOW. WE CAN'T HAVE HER MOONLIGHTING AS A CELEBRITY THUG.
"LARGE CONTRACT. BRING YOUR FRIENDS" IT SAYS.
BUT THEN WHAT'S A LITTLE MEDICAL LEAVE BETWEEN FRIENDS, RIGHT?


HELLO MS FOXWORTHY?
LIEUTENANT FOXWORTHY MY FRIENDS CALL ME ELF
INDEED I REPRESENT A WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION THAT HAS BEEN COLLECTING MONEY TO PUT GLAMOUR ASSAULT OFF THE AIR.
WE HAVE OFFERED TO BUY THE PROGRAM FROM THE NETWORK, BUT HTRN CITES AN OUTRAGEOUS PRICE, AND OF COURSE REFUSES TO CURTAIL THEIR "STREET ASSAULTS."
WITHIN TWO HOURS OF "YOUR" EPISODE, WE WERE SWAMPED WITH DONATIONS, DOUBLING THE SIZE OF OUR WAR CHEST
WE'RE STILL FAR SHORT OF THE ASKING PRICE FOR THE PROGRAM, BUT IT OCCURRED TO US THAT THE TERM "WAR CHEST" ITSELF SUGGESTED AN ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY
LOTS OF BIG WORDS. IF YOU WANT TO PAY ME TO KILL GLAMOUR ASSAULT THE ANSWER IS "YES"


LIEUTENANT, THIS JOB IS GOING TO BE A BIG ONE. I NEED TO PULL YOU FROM MEDICAL LEAVE
SIR, I'D LOVE THAT I FEEL GOOD.
I THOUGHT AS MUCH. YOU LOOK GOOD.
ERR... NOT THE NEW BODY
SIR?
I MEAN, IT LOOKS GOOD TOO.
YOU LOOK LIKE YOU'D FEEL GOOD. NO, I MEAN YOU LOOK LIKE YOU DO FEEL GOOD. BUT NOT FEEL FEEL. YOU JUST
I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TRYING TO SAY, SIR.
WELL, AT LEAST ONE OF US DOES
AND IT FEELS GOOD

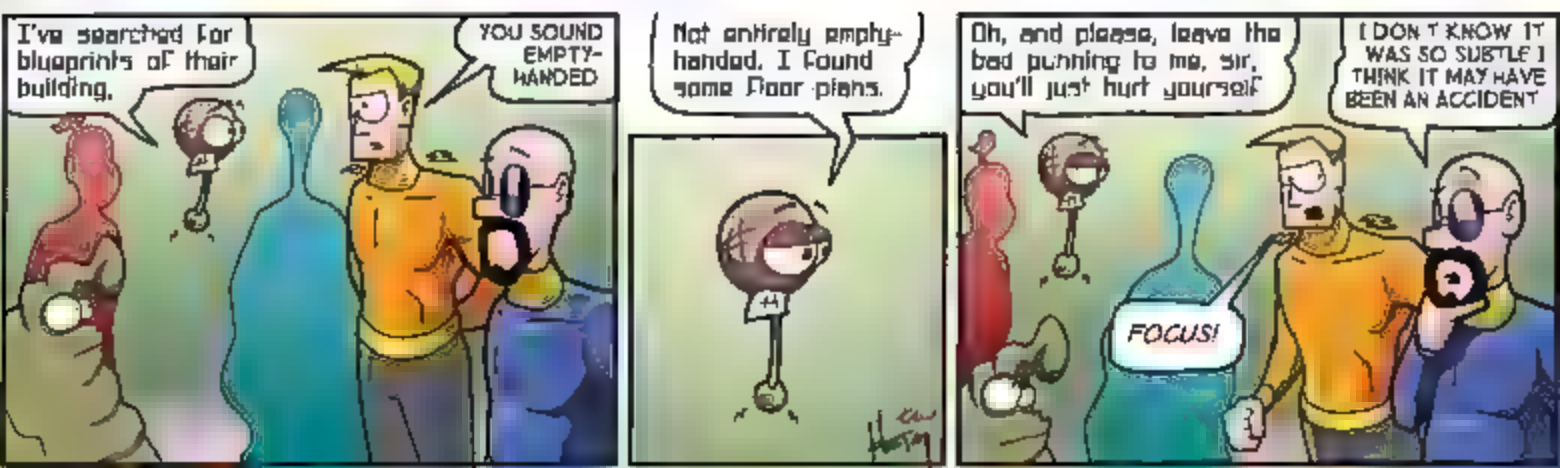

PLANNING AN OPERATION
I'M NOT SURE, CAPTAIN. YOU ACCEPTED THAT HALF-DOWN BEFORE YOU EVEN LOOKED AT OPERATIONAL PARAMETERS.
Schlock Mercenary
THAT'S BECAUSE OUR TARGET IS A VERY SOFT TARGET. IN A WORST-CASE SCENARIO, WE JUST BURN THEIR OPERATION FROM ORBIT AND RUN.
WE DON'T COLLECT THE REMAINING 50% IF IT'S THAT MESSY AND WE'D PROBABLY END UP WITH THE MILITARY AFTER US.
THAT'S WHY WE'RE HERE. WE'VE MADE PAYROLL, AND WE'VE GOT MONEY TO SPEND SETTING THIS OPERATION UP PROPERLY. ALL WE NEED TO DO IS FIGURE OUT HOW TO TAKE GLAMOUR ASSAULT OFF THE AIR CLEANLY AND PERMANENTLY.


Captain, it's a reality show... you could kill everybody involved, and the network would just put together a new team for the next
SO IT'S LIKE FIGHTING A POPULAR INSURGENCY, WHERE THE ENEMY WE CAN SEE IS JUST THE BEGINNING OF THE PROBLEM?
ENNESBY, TELL ME MORE ABOUT THIS NETWORK. WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO DO TO A SUCCESSFUL TV SHOW TO KEEP THEM FROM BRINGING IT BACK?
It still sounds satisfying.
I don't know. Litigation, maybe? But if the show is profitable enough, even that won't work

KTRN is publicly traded. I've seen the books: these programs pay for themselves very, VERY quickly, and don't rely on named talent. Take one down, and it'll be replaced within the season.
The only way to kill the program *permanently* would be to kill the whole network.
Okay, now *that* sounds satisfying.
OH, CAPTAIN PLEEEEASE?

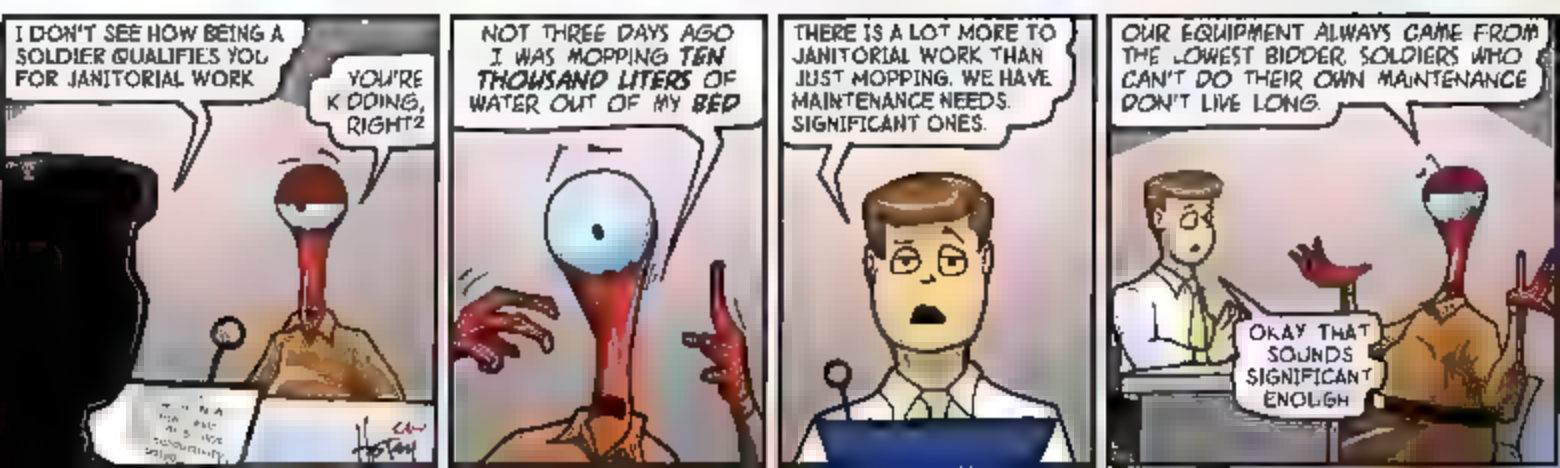
CAN WE KILL AN ENTIRE TELEVISION NETWORK ON OUR BUDGET?
Maybe. They're all in one building.
THEY'LL BE HEAVILY INSURED. WE'D HAVE TO KILL THE *PEOPLE* TOO. AND THE INVESTORS. WE'LL HAVE A BODYCOUNT IN THE THOUSANDS.
The fun starts to turn tedious before that.
AND WE CERTAINLY DON'T WANT THIS TO STOP BEING *FUN*.
I'm just sayin'

CAPTAIN, IF I MAY? CORPORATE INSURANCE IS A LITTLE LIKE A RESERVE FORCE THAT YOUR ENEMY HIDES FROM YOU
HIT HIM HARD ENOUGH AND SUDDENLY YOU FIND HE HAS ASSETS COVERING HIS RETREAT AND HELPING HIM REGROUP
BUT IN THIS CASE WE *KNOW* ABOUT THOSE ASSETS. THEIR INSURANCE IS A MATTER OF PUBLIC RECORD.
OKAY, MASSEY HAS JUST VOLUNTEERED TO TAKE OUT THE ENEMY'S RESERVE FORCE.
I VOLUNTEERED?
And now you get to kick some assets.


I've searched for blueprints of their building.
YOU SOUND EMPTY-HANDED
Not entirely empty-handed. I found some floor plans.
Oh, and please, leave the bad punning to me, sir, you'll just hurt yourself
I DON'T KNOW IT WAS SO SUBTLE I THINK IT MAY HAVE BEEN AN ACCIDENT
FOCUS!

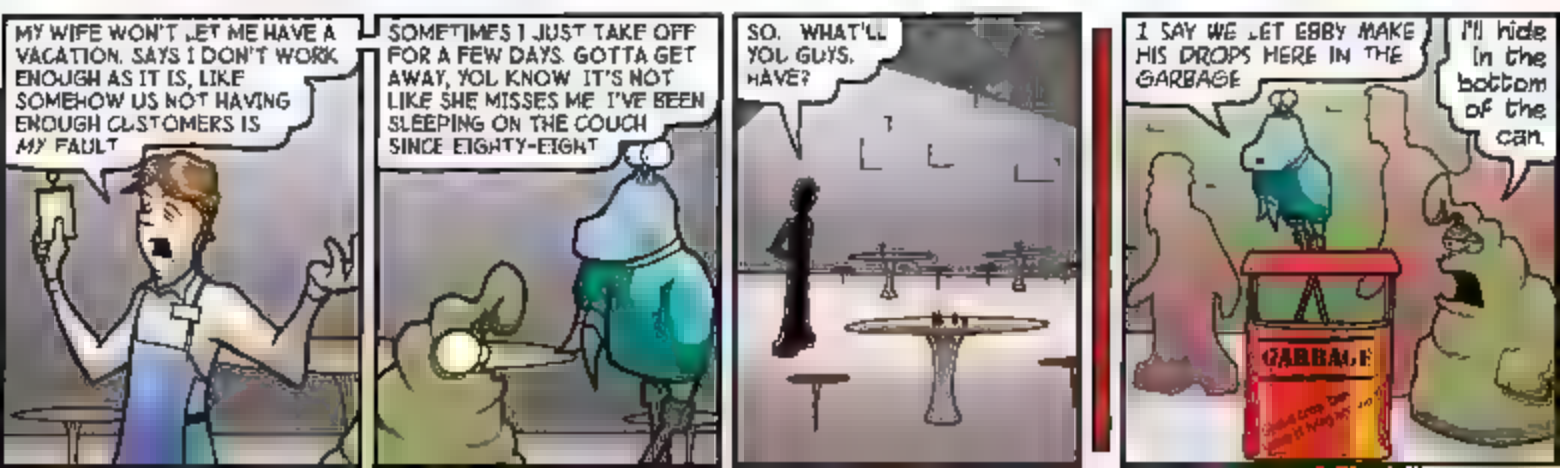
WE NEED TO GET SOMEBODY INTO THE BUILDING.
Burgle a little recon?
NO.. WE NEED MORE INFORMATION THAN THAT WE NEED SOMEBODY ON THE *INSIDE*
HTRN *IS* AN EQUAL-OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER MAYBE THEY'LL HIRE ONE OF OUR NON-HUMANS AS A JANITOR.
Sergeant Ebbimoth could probably look into that
OH, EYE SHOULD HAVE SEEN *THAT* COMING.

JOB INTERVIEW IN PROGRESS
MISTER EBBIRNOTH, WHAT WAS YOUR LAST JOB, AND WHY DID YOU LEAVE?
IT'S RIGHT THERE ON THE APP I WAS A LINE MANAGER IN A PRIVATE SECURITY AND ARMED RESPONSE PROVIDER
I READ THAT, YES. BUT WHAT EXACTLY IS "SECURITY AND ARMED RESPONSE?"
WEEKS OF BOREDOM PUNCTUATED WITH SHORT PERIODS OF TERROR, BLOOD AND CHAOS.
AND WHY DID YOU LEAVE?

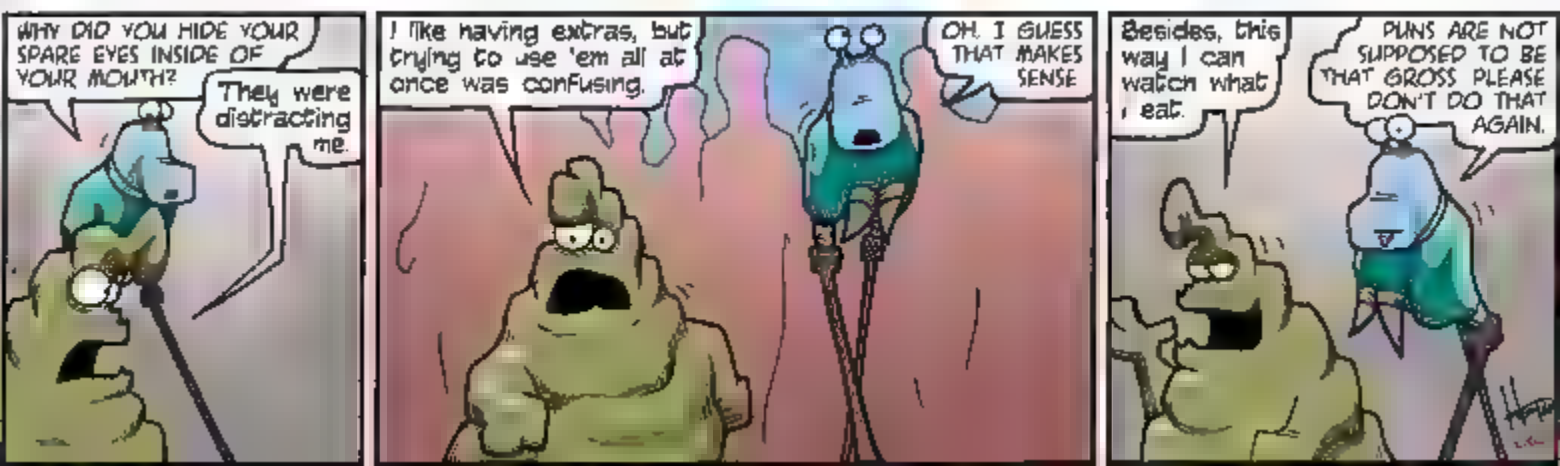

I DON'T SEE HOW BEING A SOLDIER QUALIFIES YOU FOR JANITORIAL WORK
YOU'RE K DOING, RIGHT?
NOT THREE DAYS AGO I WAS MOPPING TEN THOUSAND LITERS OF WATER OUT OF MY BED
THERE IS A LOT MORE TO JANITORIAL WORK THAN JUST MOPPING. WE HAVE MAINTENANCE NEEDS. SIGNIFICANT ONES.
OUR EQUIPMENT ALWAYS CAME FROM THE LOWEST BIDDER. SOLDIERS WHO CAN'T DO THEIR OWN MAINTENANCE DON'T LIVE LONG.
OKAY THAT SOUNDS SIGNIFICANT ENOUGH

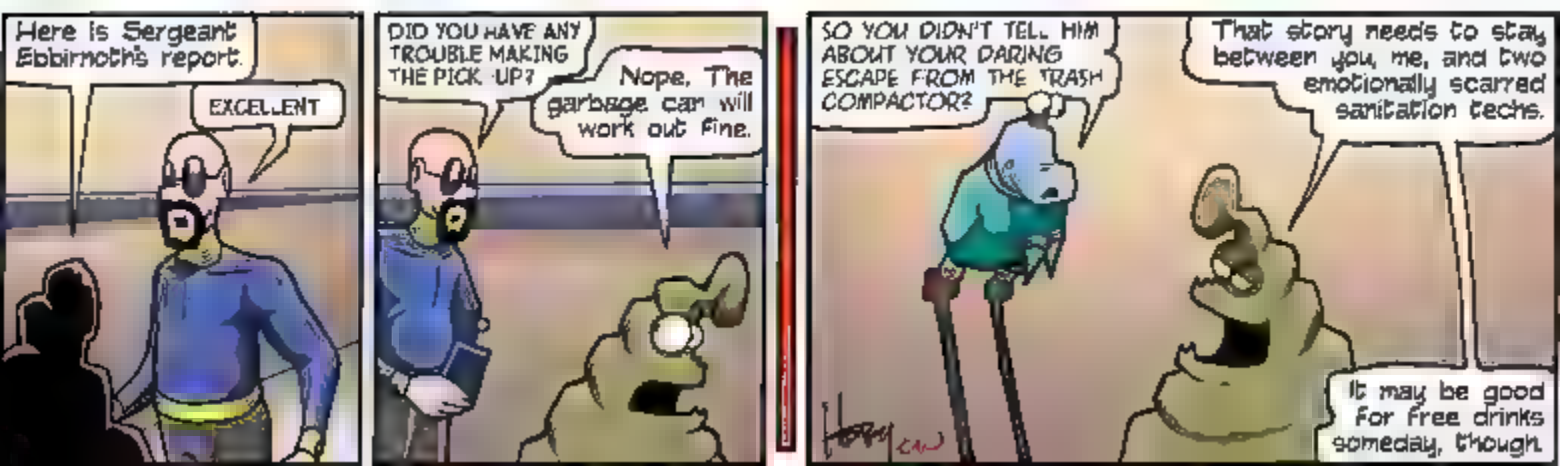
MIDTOWN SAN ASIMOV CELESCHUL LESS THAN A BLOCK FROM THE HTRN BUILDING.
WHAT DO YOU THINK SARGE?
They sell food here It's perfect.
IT'S ALSO PRACTICALLY NEXT DOOR TO HTRN, AND THEY SERVE UNIOC SPECIALTIES. IT'S A PERFECT PLACE FOR SERGEANT EBBIRNOTH TO CHECK IN WITHOUT RAISING SUSPICION
Manifold Worlds Café
Schlock Mercenary

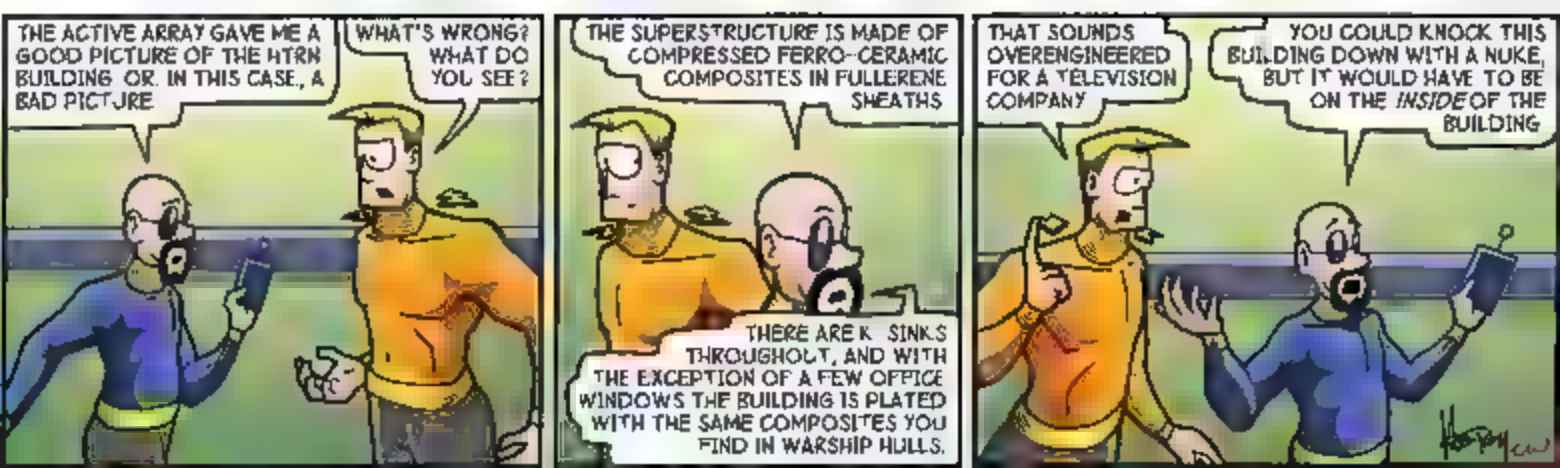
HEY, LOOK AT YOU TWO A CARBOSILICATE AMORPH AND A FRELLENT!!
YOU'RE PRETTY GOOD IS THIS YOUR PLACE?
NAW, MY WIFE OWNS IT WELL. SHE OWNS 75% BUT SHE'S GOT A STRANGLEHOLD ON OUR PURCHASING. WON'T LET ME STOCK THE STUFF OUR MORE EXOTIC CUSTOMERS ARE LOOKING FOR
AT LEAST YOU'RE NOT A WAGE-SLAVE, RIGHT?
WAGE SLAVES HAVE IT EASY AT LEAST THEY GET VACATION TIME!

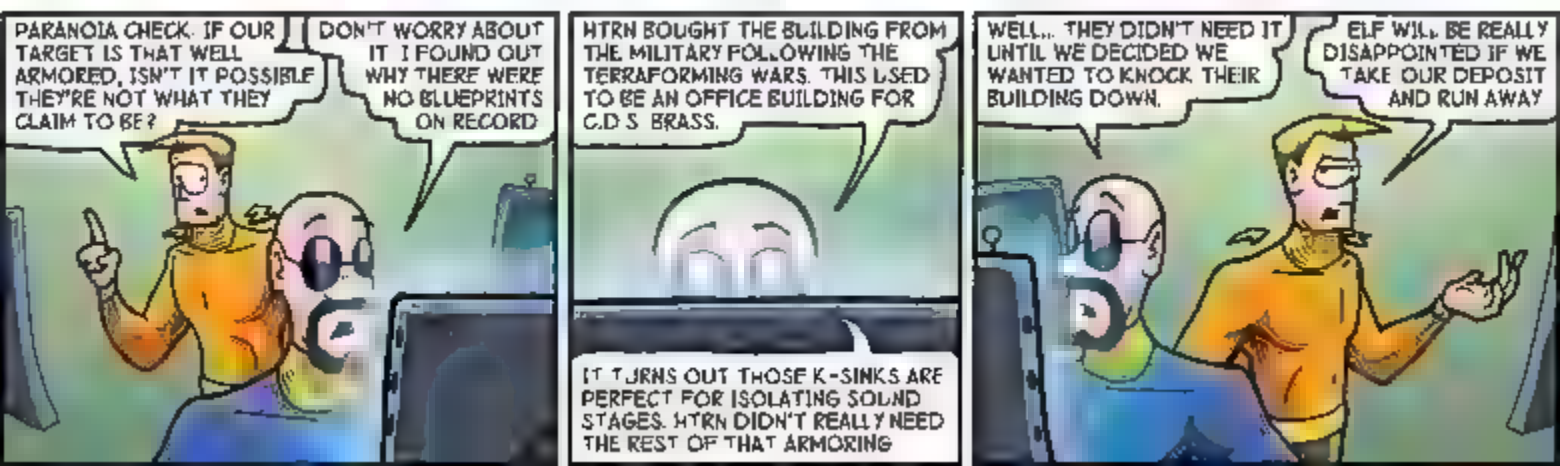

MY WIFE WON'T LET ME HAVE A VACATION. SAYS I DON'T WORK ENOUGH AS IT IS, LIKE SOMEHOW US NOT HAVING ENOUGH CUSTOMERS IS MY FAULT
SOMETIMES I JUST TAKE OFF FOR A FEW DAYS. GOTTA GET AWAY, YOU KNOW. IT'S NOT LIKE SHE MISSES ME. I'VE BEEN SLEEPING ON THE COUCH SINCE EIGHTY-EIGHT
SO. WHAT'LL YOU GUYS HAVE?
I SAY WE LET EBBY MAKE HIS DROPS HERE IN THE GARBAGE
I'll hide in the bottom of the can.
GARBAGE

BY THE WAY SARGE, I LIKE THE TWO-EYED LOOK
Huh?
YOU'RE BACK TO JUST THE TWO EYES. THE FOUR-EYED THING WAS CREEPING ME OUT
Oh. Yeah, that
WE'RE NOT GOING TO DISCOVER YOUR SPARE EYES IN A FRIDGE SOMEWHERE ARE WE?
No, they're right here.
OKAY I DIDN'T NEED TO SEE THAT

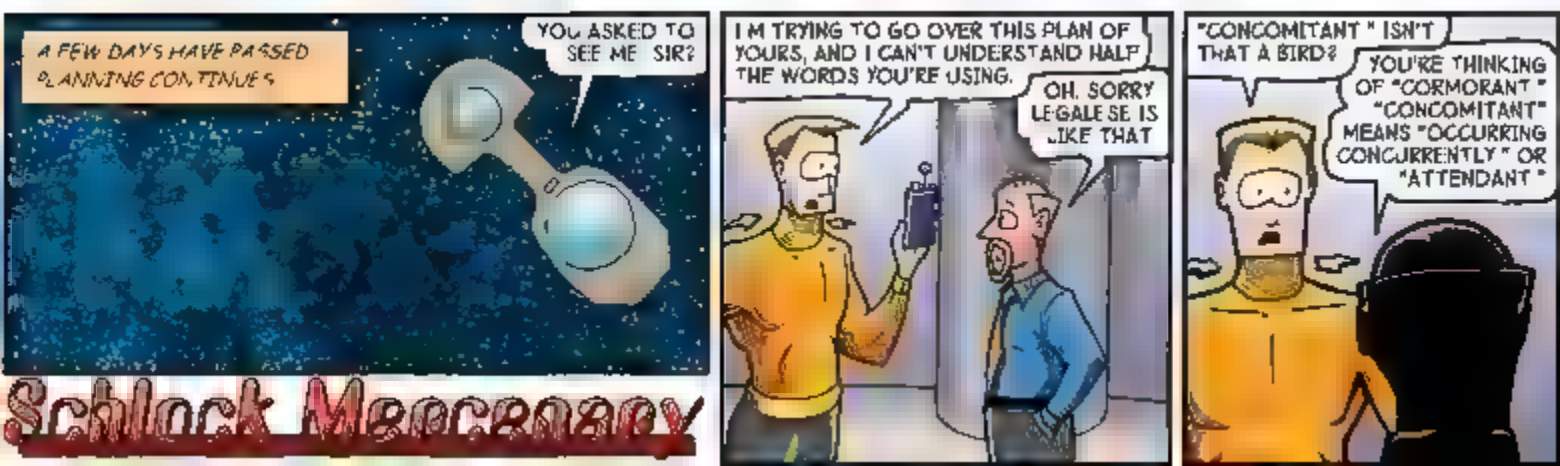

WHY DID YOU HIDE YOUR SPARE EYES INSIDE OF YOUR MOUTH?
They were distracting me.
I like having extras, but trying to use 'em all at once was confusing.
OH. I GUESS THAT MAKES SENSE
Besides, this way I can watch what I eat.
PUNS ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE THAT GROSS. PLEASE DON'T DO THAT AGAIN.


Here is Sergeant Ebbirnoth's report.
EXCELLENT
DID YOU HAVE ANY TROUBLE MAKING THE PICK-UP?
Nope. The garbage can will work out fine.
SO YOU DIDN'T TELL HIM ABOUT YOUR DARING ESCAPE FROM THE TRASH COMPACTOR?
That story needs to stay between you, me, and two emotionally scarred sanitation techs.
It may be good for free drinks someday, though.

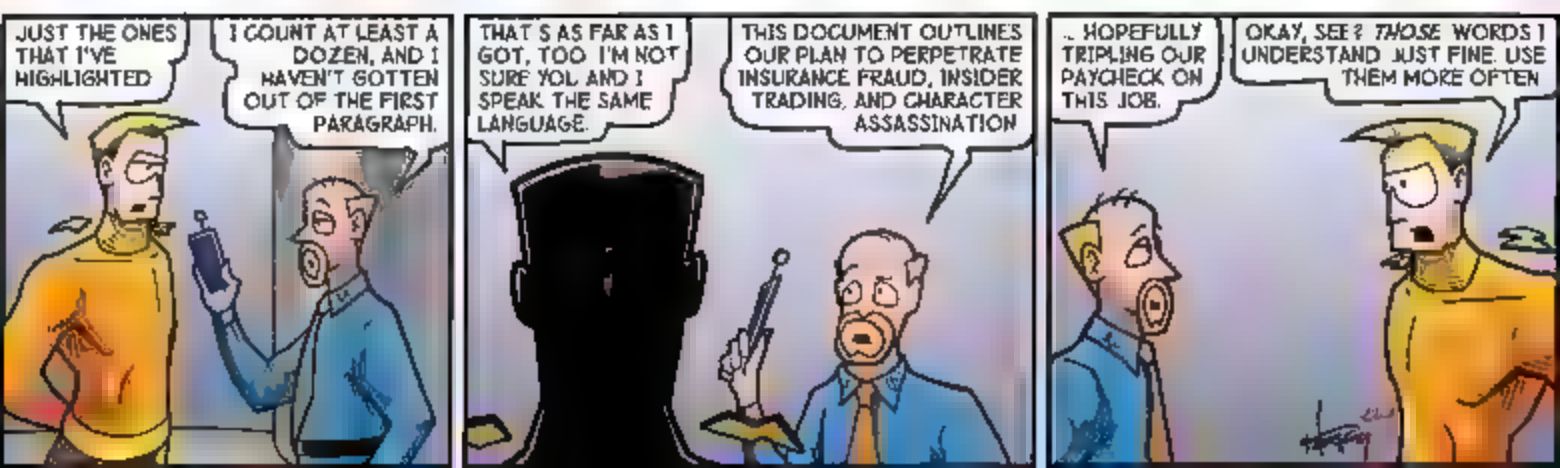

THE ACTIVE ARRAY GAVE ME A GOOD PICTURE OF THE HTRN BUILDING OR, IN THIS CASE, A BAD PICTURE
WHAT'S WRONG? WHAT DO YOU SEE?
THE SUPERSTRUCTURE IS MADE OF COMPRESSED FERRO-CERAMIC COMPOSITES IN FULLERENE SHEATHS
THERE ARE K SINKS THROUGHOUT, AND WITH THE EXCEPTION OF A FEW OFFICE WINDOWS THE BUILDING IS PLATED WITH THE SAME COMPOSITES YOU FIND IN WARSHIP HULLS.
THAT SOUNDS OVERENGINEERED FOR A TELEVISION COMPANY
YOU COULD KNOCK THIS BUILDING DOWN WITH A NUKE, BUT IT WOULD HAVE TO BE ON THE *INSIDE* OF THE BUILDING


PARANOIA CHECK. IF OUR TARGET IS THAT WELL ARMORED, ISN'T IT POSSIBLE THEY'RE NOT WHAT THEY CLAIM TO BE?
DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT. I FOUND OUT WHY THERE WERE NO BLUEPRINTS ON RECORD.
HTRN BOUGHT THE BUILDING FROM THE MILITARY FOLLOWING THE TERRAFORMING WARS. THIS USED TO BE AN OFFICE BUILDING FOR C.D.S. BRASS.
IT TURNS OUT THOSE K-SINKS ARE PERFECT FOR ISOLATING SOUND STAGES. HTRN DIDN'T REALLY NEED THE REST OF THAT ARMORING.
WELL... THEY DIDN'T NEED IT UNTIL WE DECIDED WE WANTED TO KNOCK THEIR BUILDING DOWN.
ELF WILL BE REALLY DISAPPOINTED IF WE TAKE OUR DEPOSIT AND RUN AWAY.

CAN WE DESTROY THAT BUILDING WITHOUT TAKING OUT THE REST OF THE BLOCK?
YES, BUT IT'LL TAKE SOME SPECIAL EQUIPMENT
HOW SPECIAL?
GET PRONTO IN HERE
I NEED TO TRAIN HIM ON THE OPERATION AND PLACEMENT OF ANTIMATTER CUTTING CHARGES.
I'M GOING TO GO GET DRUNK. PLEASE DON'T TELL ME HOW THE TRAINING GOES.

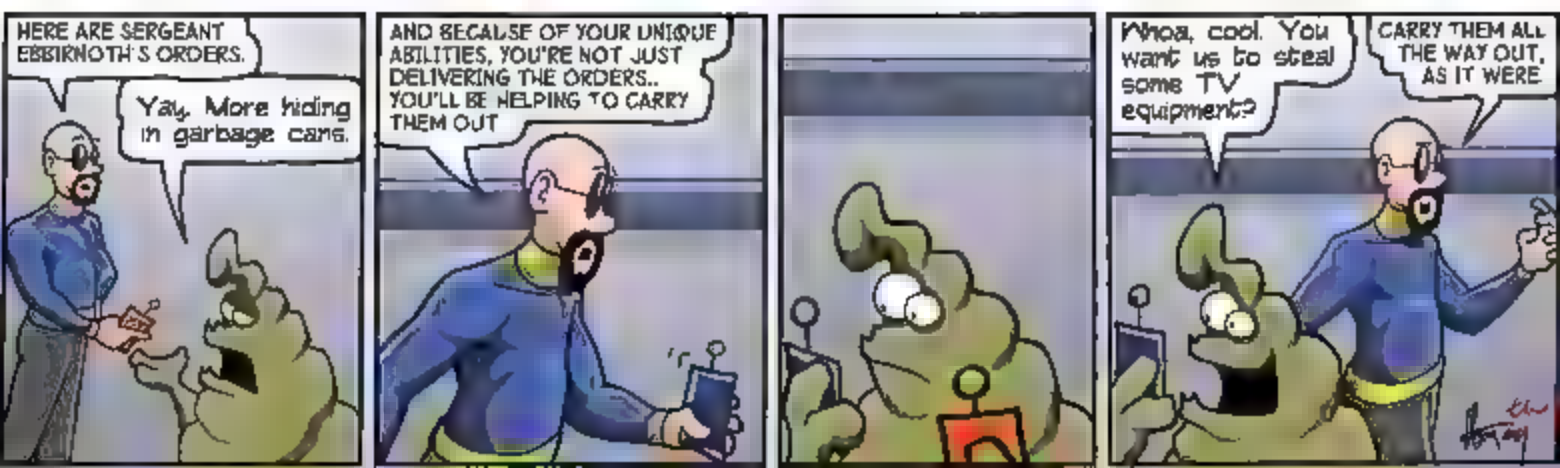

A FEW DAYS HAVE PASSED
PLANNING CONTINUES
YOU ASKED TO SEE ME SIR?
Schlock Mercenary
I'M TRYING TO GO OVER THIS PLAN OF YOURS, AND I CAN'T UNDERSTAND HALF THE WORDS YOU'RE USING.
OH, SORRY LEGALESE IS LIKE THAT
"CONCOMITANT" ISN'T THAT A BIRD?
YOU'RE THINKING OF "CORMORANT." "CONCOMITANT" MEANS "OCCURRING CONCURRENTLY" OR "ATTENDANT."

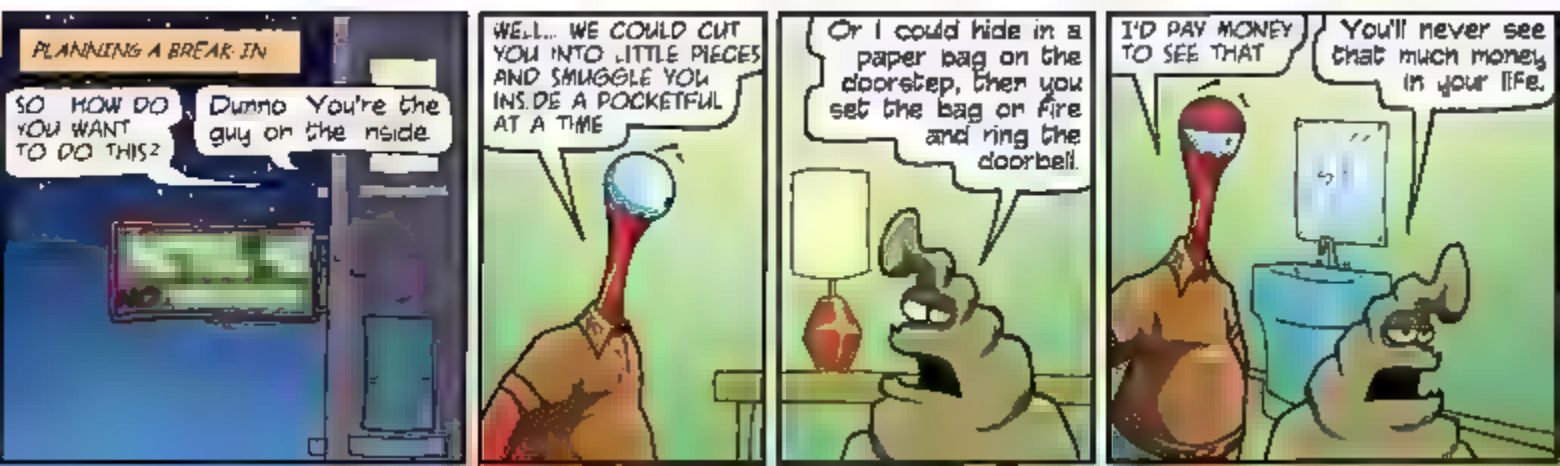
LIKE THE ATTENDANT WHO SELLS TOKENS FOR THE HITRANS?
UMM. NO. HE WOULD BE A NOUN. I'M USING AN ADJECTIVE
SO WE'RE NOT TALKING ABOUT A TOKEN-SELLING BIRD, THEN.
HOW MANY WORDS ARE YOU HAVING TROUBLE WITH, SIR?

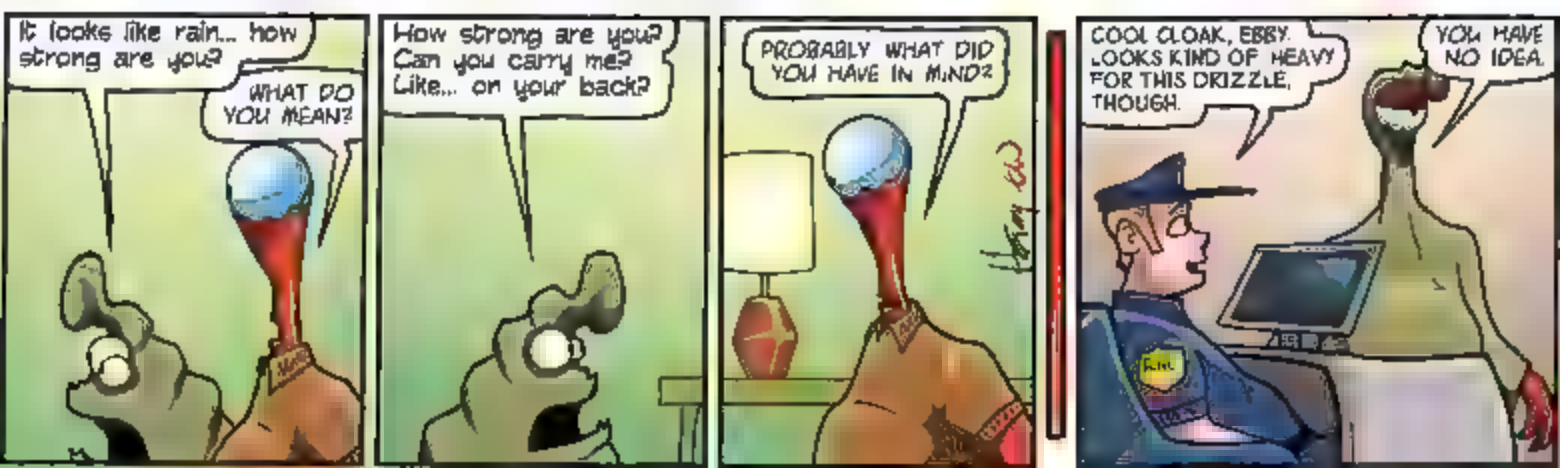

JUST THE ONES THAT I'VE HIGHLIGHTED
I COUNT AT LEAST A DOZEN, AND I HAVEN'T GOTTEN OUT OF THE FIRST PARAGRAPH.
THAT'S AS FAR AS I GOT, TOO. I'M NOT SURE YOU AND I SPEAK THE SAME LANGUAGE.
THIS DOCUMENT OUTLINES OUR PLAN TO PERPETRATE INSURANCE FRAUD, INSIDER TRADING, AND CHARACTER ASSASSINATION
.. HOPEFULLY TRIPLING OUR PAYCHECK ON THIS JOB.
OKAY, SEE? *THOSE* WORDS I UNDERSTAND JUST FINE. USE THEM MORE OFTEN

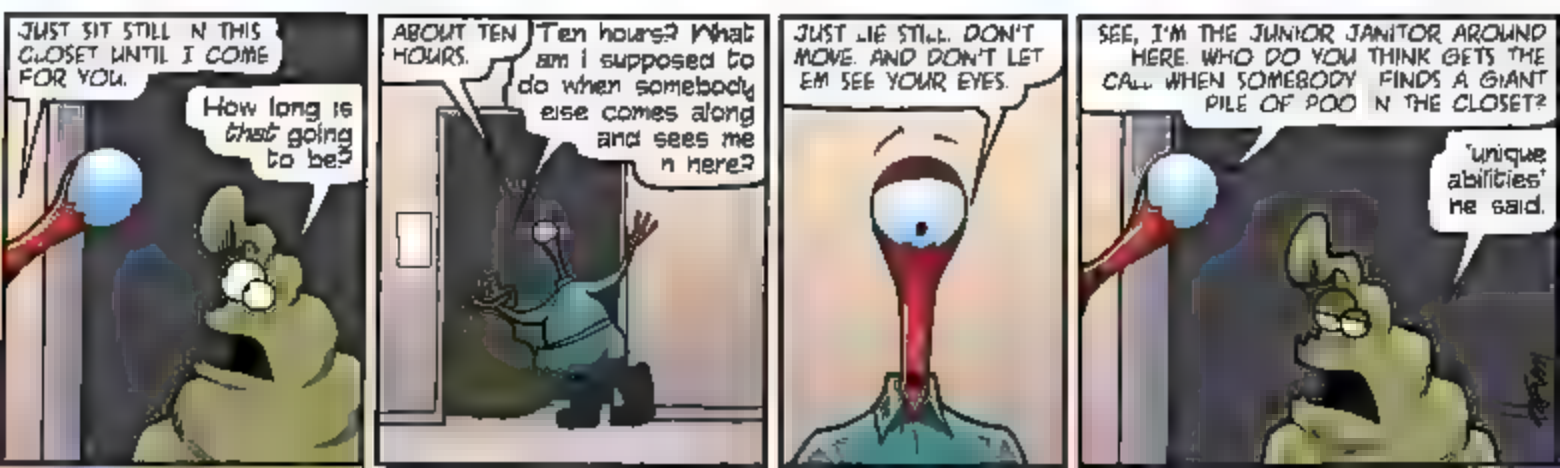
HERE'S MASSEY'S PLAN FOR TAKING CARE OF THE INSURANCE PROBLEM.
HMMM.
OKAY, THAT'LL WORK... AND *THAT* IS JUST *BRILLIANT*.. HRRMM... OKAY. THURL AND ENNESBY ARE PROBABLY UP TO THE HACKING PART. A LOT OF THIS DEPENDS ON OUR ABILITY TO GET OUTSIDE HELP, THOUGH.
JUST TELL ME IF YOU THINK WE CAN PULL THIS OFF
YOU DIDN'T GET PAST THE WORD "CONCOMITANT," I TAKE IT?
CAN. WE. PULL THIS. OFF?

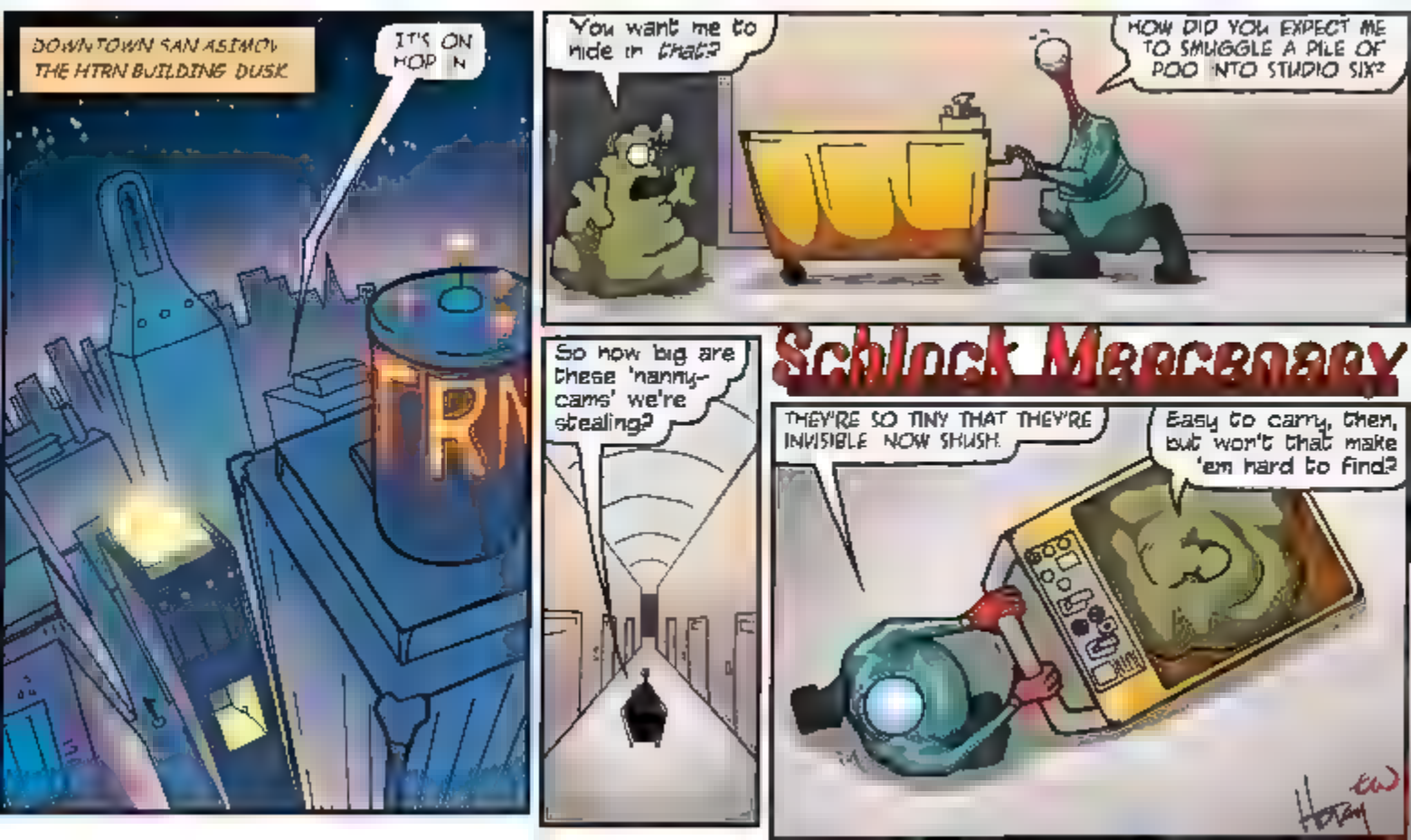
.. SO THAT'S THE GENERAL PICTURE. CAN YOU TWO HACK THAT?
IT'LL BE TRICKY
It's not tricky. It's out of our reach.. unless Massey can provide that cut-out. Even then, we'll need more de-icer than I have at my disposal.
DE-ICER? IS SOMETHING FROZEN?
FORGIVE THE CAPTAIN. HACKING IS SOMETHING HE ONLY UNDERSTANDS IN A VERY GENERAL, SHARP-THINGS KIND OF WAY
DO I NEED TO GO GET SOME SHARP THINGS?


HERE ARE SERGEANT EBBIRNOTH'S ORDERS.
Yay. More hiding in garbage cans.
AND BECAUSE OF YOUR UNIQUE ABILITIES, YOU'RE NOT JUST DELIVERING THE ORDERS.. YOU'LL BE HELPING TO CARRY THEM OUT
Whoa, cool. You want us to steal some TV equipment?
CARRY THEM ALL THE WAY OUT, AS IT WERE


PLANNING A BREAK-IN
SO HOW DO YOU WANT TO DO THIS?
Dunno. You're the guy on the inside.
WELL... WE COULD CUT YOU INTO LITTLE PIECES AND SMUGGLE YOU INSIDE A POCKETFUL AT A TIME.
Or I could hide in a paper bag on the doorstep, then you set the bag on fire and ring the doorbell.
I'D PAY MONEY TO SEE THAT.
You'll never see that much money in your life.

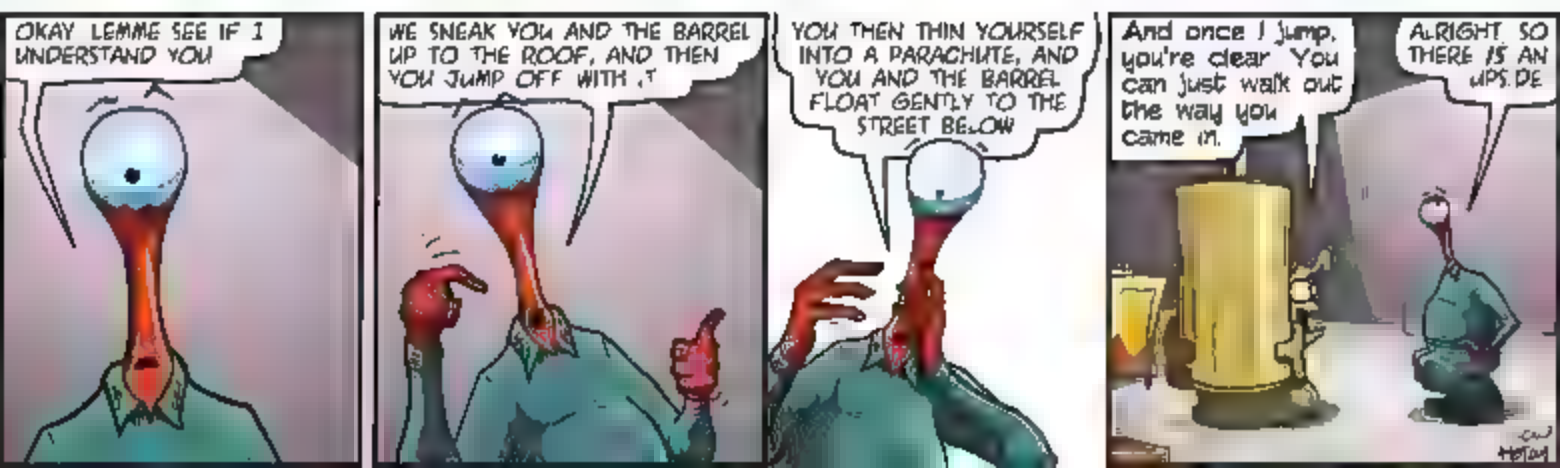

It looks like rain... how strong are you?
WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
How strong are you? Can you carry me? Like... on your back?
PROBABLY WHAT DID YOU HAVE IN MIND?
COOL CLOAK, EBBY. LOOKS KIND OF HEAVY FOR THIS DRIZZLE, THOUGH.
YOU HAVE NO IDEA.


JUST SIT STILL IN THIS CLOSET UNTIL I COME FOR YOU.
How long is *that* going to be?
ABOUT TEN HOURS.
Ten hours? What am I supposed to do when somebody else comes along and sees me in here?
JUST LIE STILL. DON'T MOVE. AND DON'T LET EM SEE YOUR EYES.
SEE, I'M THE JUNIOR JANITOR AROUND HERE. WHO DO YOU THINK GETS THE CALL WHEN SOMEBODY FINDS A GIANT PILE OF POO IN THE CLOSET?
'unique abilities' he said.


DOWNTOWN SAN ASIMOV
THE HTRN BUILDING DUSK
IT'S ON
HOP IN
You want me to hide in that?
HOW DID YOU EXPECT ME TO SMUGGLE A PILE OF POO INTO STUDIO SIX?
Schlock Mercenary
So how big are these 'nanny-cams' we're stealing?
THEY'RE SO TINY THAT THEY'RE INVISIBLE NOW SHUSH.
Easy to carry, then, but won't that make 'em hard to find?

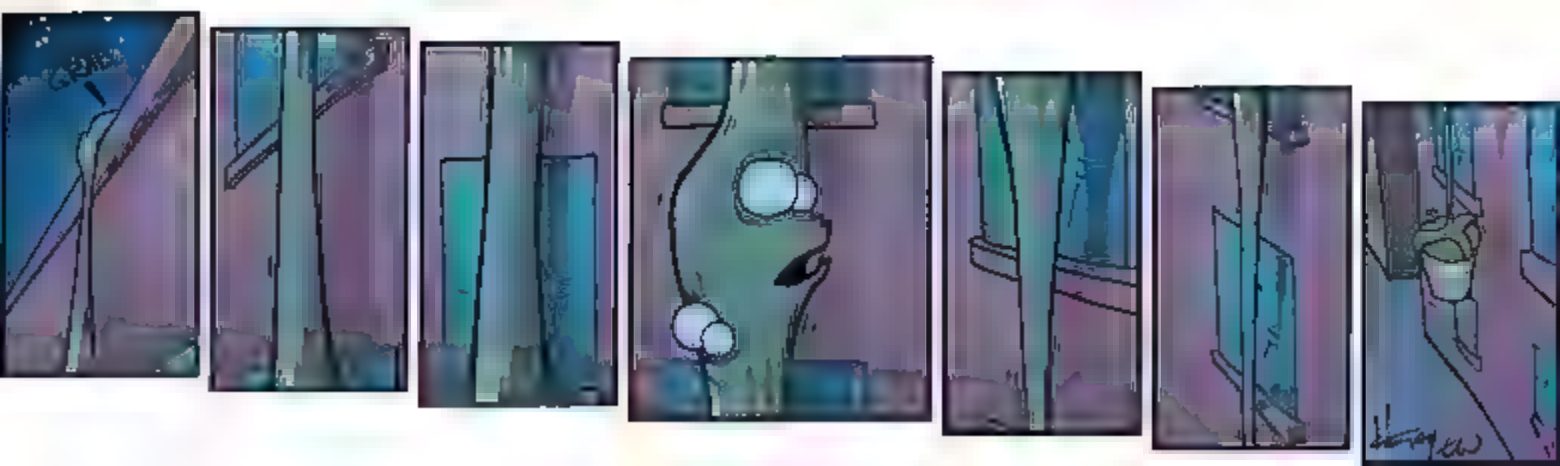
THEY'RE DISPENSED FROM A LARGER CONTAINER. A CAN OR SOMETHING. IT'LL BE LABELED. LOOK AROUND
Boy was I wrong.
Easy to *find*. Probably not so easy to carry.
NANNY CA

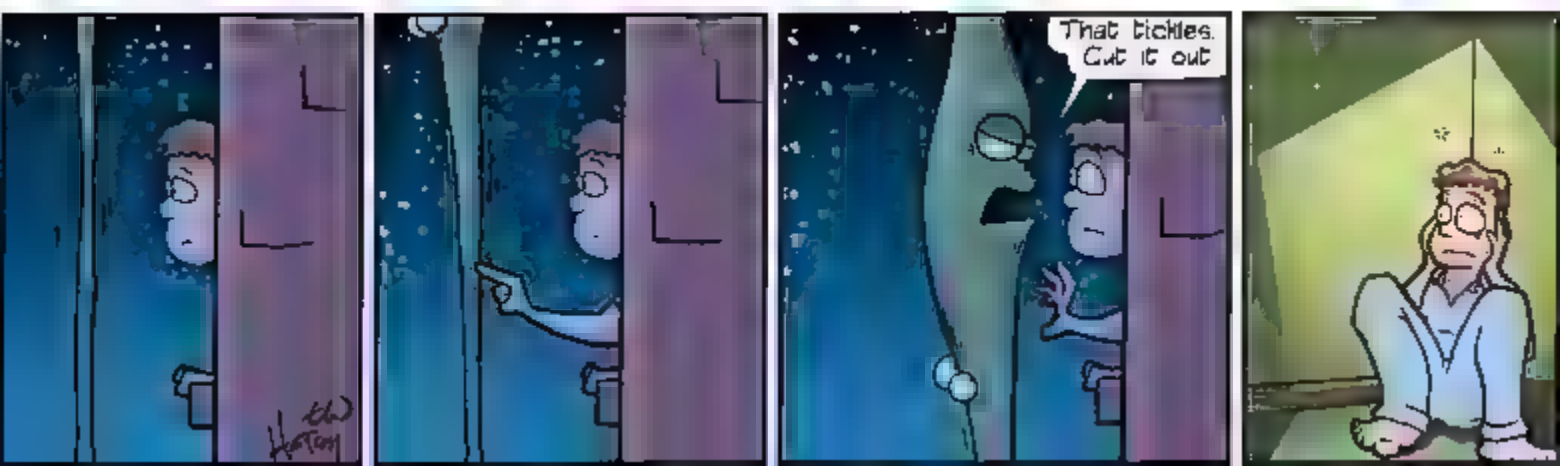
Okay, I was wrong. It's bulky, but it's not very heavy at all
GREAT BUT IT'S STILL TOO BIG TO SMUGGLE OUT OF THE BUILDING AS TRASH
Hmmmm...
Does this building have an observation deck?
I HATE YOUR IDEA ALREADY

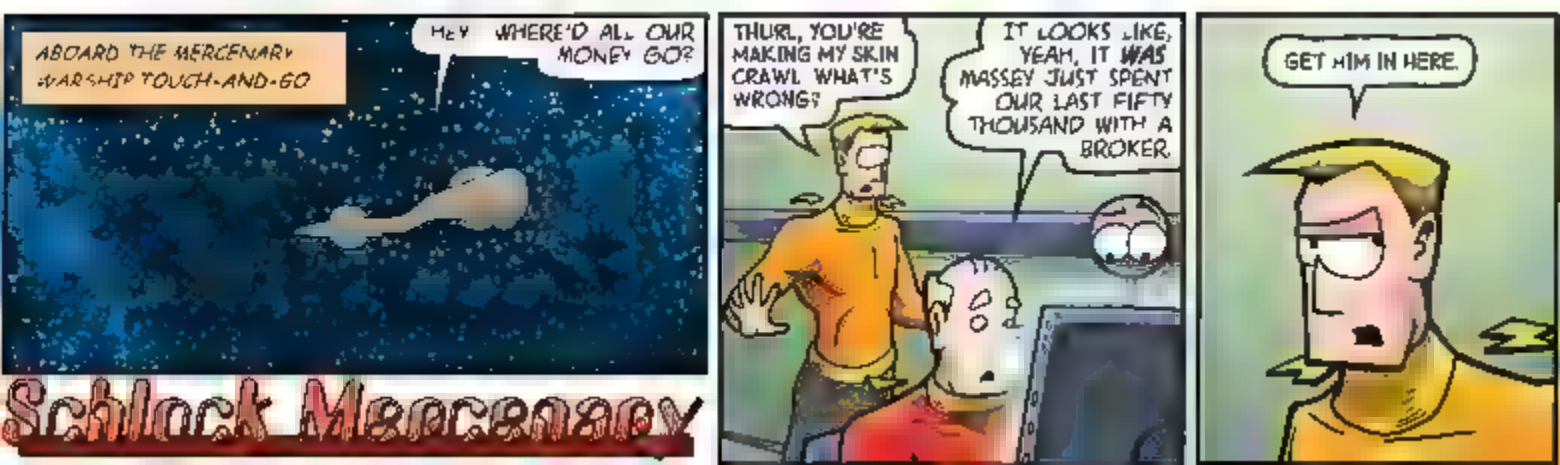

OKAY LEMME SEE IF I UNDERSTAND YOU
WE SNEAK YOU AND THE BARREL UP TO THE ROOF, AND THEN YOU JUMP OFF WITH IT
YOU THEN THIN YOURSELF INTO A PARACHUTE, AND YOU AND THE BARREL FLOAT GENTLY TO THE STREET BELOW
And once I jump, you're clear You can just walk out the way you came in.
ALRIGHT SO THERE IS AN UPSIDE

BEFORE WE COMMIT TO THIS. HAVE YOU EVER ACTUALLY DONE ANYTHING LIKE THIS BEFORE?
Yup Twice
OF course, the First time I used my plasgun as a rocket
And the second time I wasn't trying to carry anything.
And both times the building was taller, and gravity was a lot lower
MY CONFIDENCE SOARS

OH MARK, YOU WERE RIGHT THIS ROOFTOP IS BEAUTIFUL AT NIGHT
THE VIEW ISN'T HALF SO BEAUTIFUL AS YOU ARE
WAIT... DO YOU HEAR SIRENS?
Waaaa

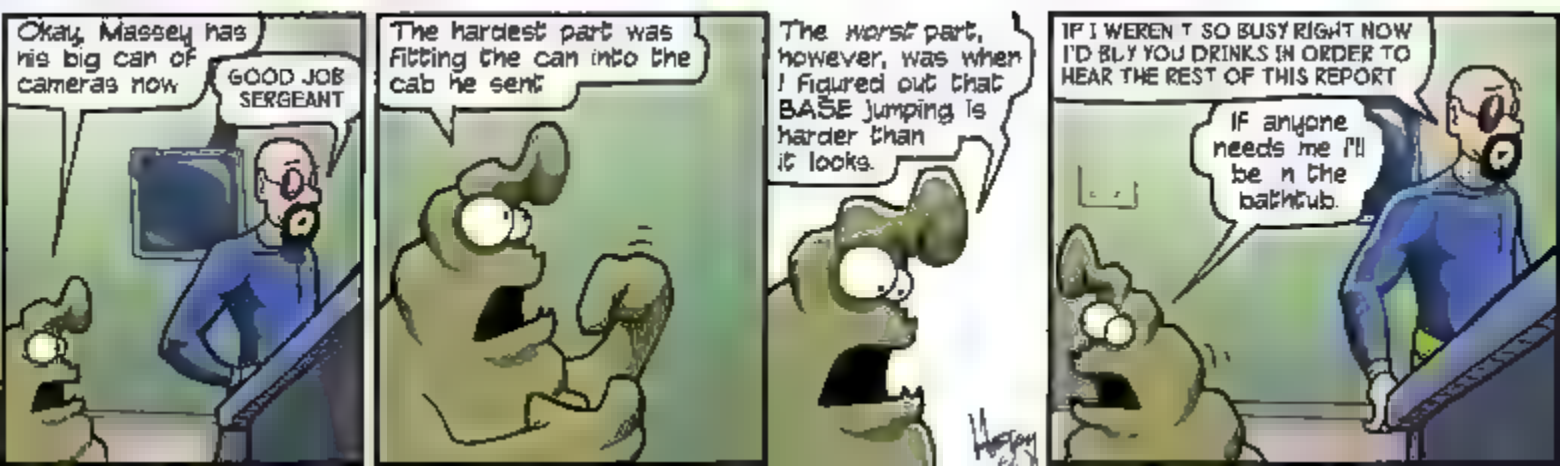


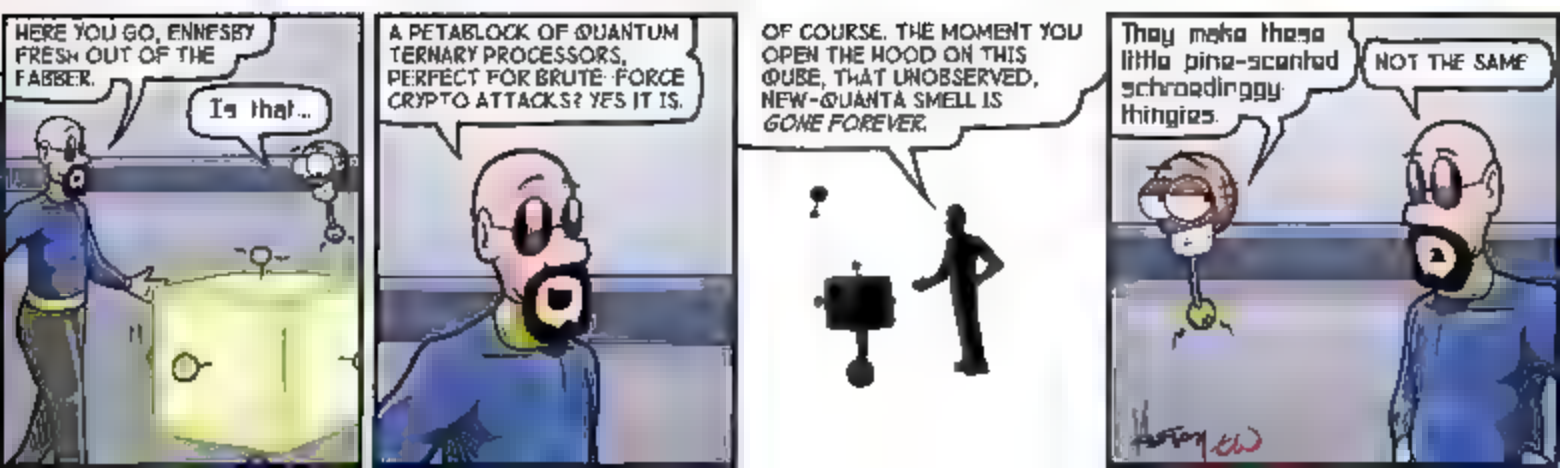

Ed Horton
That tickles. Cut it out

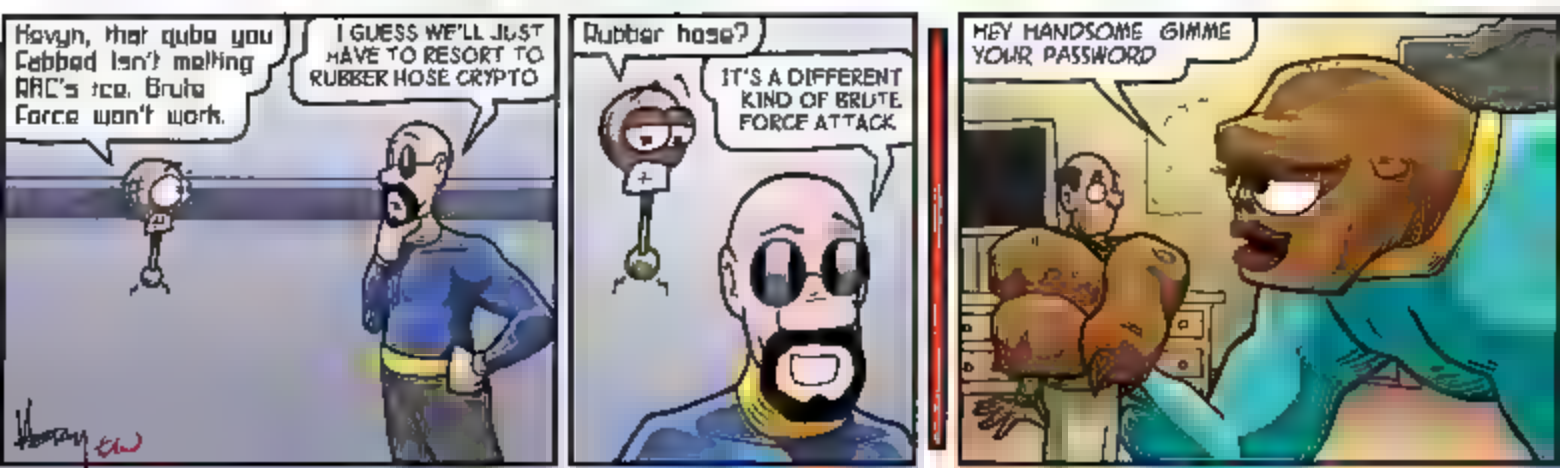

ABOARD THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH-AND-GO
HEY WHERE'D ALL OUR MONEY GO?
Schlock Mercenary
THURL, YOU'RE MAKING MY SKIN CRAWL WHAT'S WRONG?
IT LOOKS LIKE, YEAH, IT WAS MASSEY JUST SPENT OUR LAST FIFTY THOUSAND WITH A BROKER.
GET HIM IN HERE.

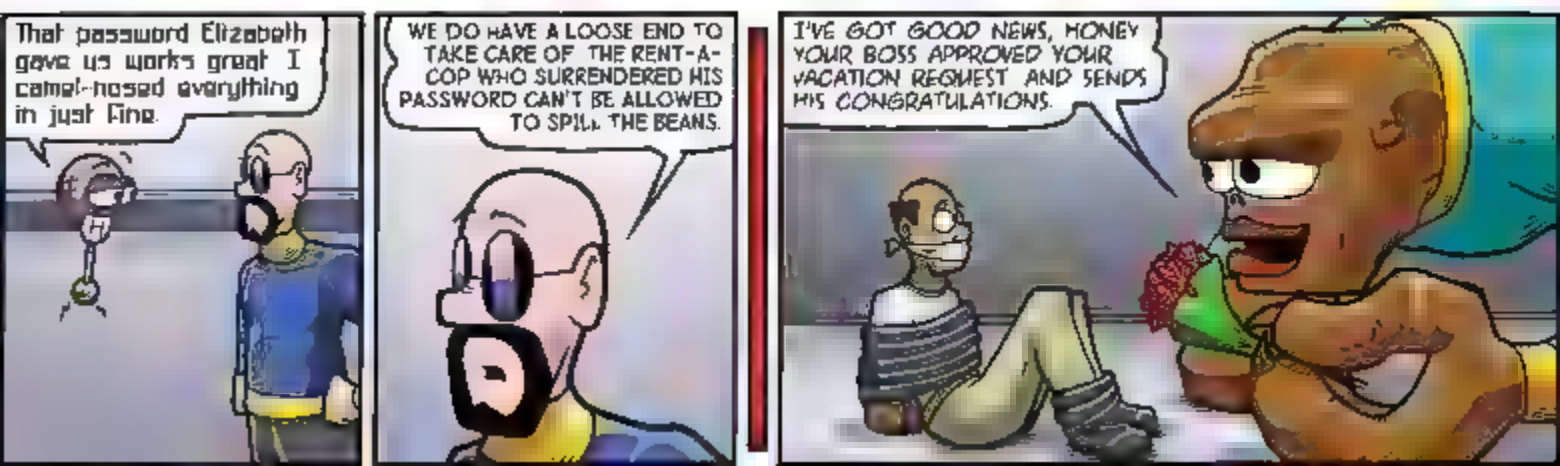
Captain, Lieutenant Massey Reynstein has rented a flat in Port Weber. Per operational security we're not supposed to call him.
UH-OH... I JUST FIGURED OUT WHAT HE SPENT THE MONEY ON.
HE'S SHORT-SELLING HTRN STOCK AND THE PRICE ALMOST DOUBLED.
HE BORROWED A HUNDRED THOUSAND SHARES AT 53, AND HTRN IS AT 96.50 IN OPEN TRADING.
SO THE STOCK PRICE WENT UP. THAT'S GOOD, RIGHT?

NO. IT'S BAD WE DON'T OWN THE SHARES. WE OWN DEBT WORTH A HUNDRED THOUSAND TIMES THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN 53 AND 96.50
THE BROKER MUST HAVE CALLED IN AN INTEREST PAYMENT ON OUR FOUR-POINT THREE MILLION IN DEBT
BEFORE I DECIDE WHICH OF LIEUTENANT REYNSTEIN'S LIMBS TO USE WHEN I BEAT HIM TO DEATH, PLEASE TELL ME I DIDN'T AGREE TO THIS PLAN SOMEWHERE ALONG THE LINE.
I JUST SPOKE IT'S YOUR TURN.
Hey, good news It's back down to 92!

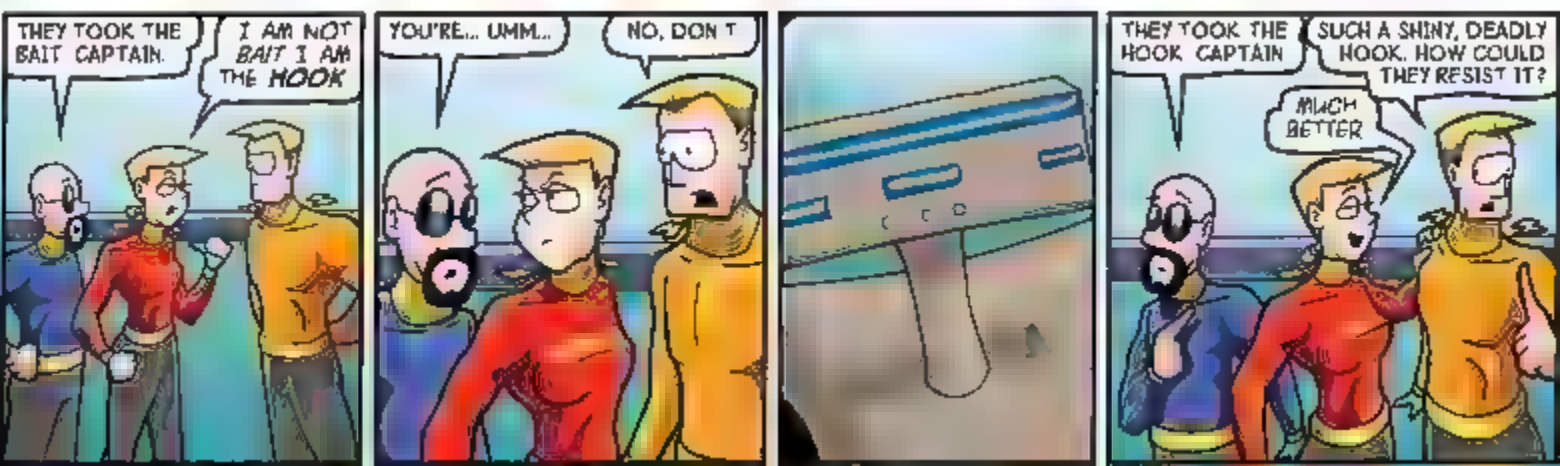

Okay, Massey has his big can of cameras now
GOOD JOB SERGEANT
The hardest part was fitting the can into the cab he sent
The *worst* part, however, was when I figured out that BASE jumping is harder than it looks.
IF I WEREN'T SO BUSY RIGHT NOW I'D BUY YOU DRINKS IN ORDER TO HEAR THE REST OF THIS REPORT
IF anyone needs me I'll be in the bathtub.

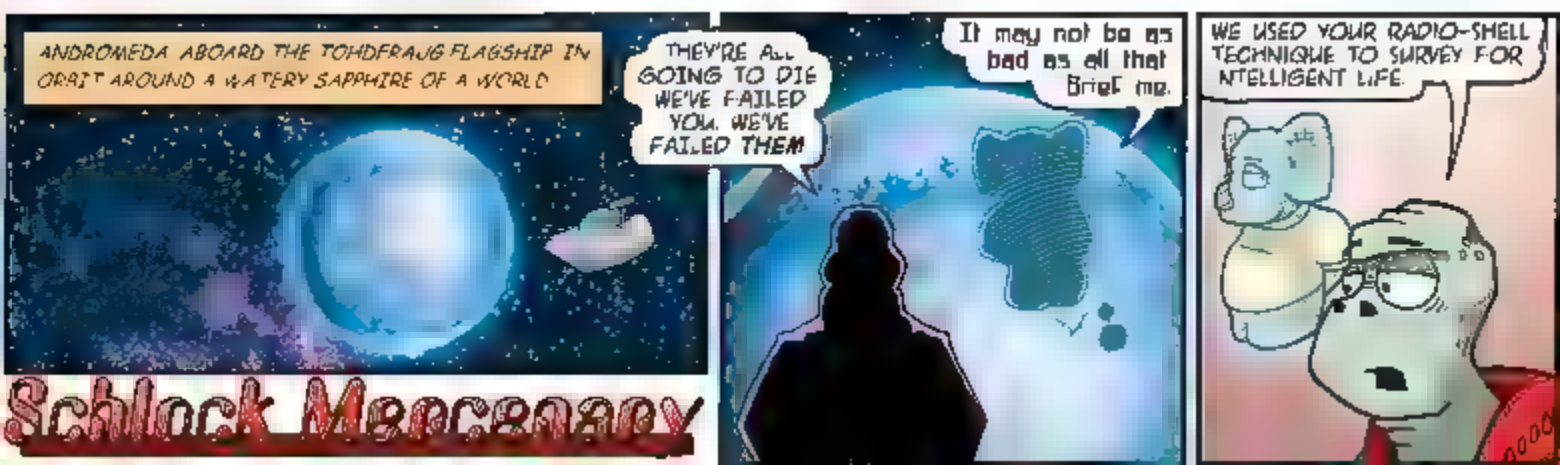

HERE YOU GO, ENNESBY FRESH OUT OF THE FABBER.
Is that...
A PETABLOCK OF QUANTUM TERNARY PROCESSORS, PERFECT FOR BRUTE-FORCE CRYPTO ATTACKS? YES IT IS.
OF COURSE. THE MOMENT YOU OPEN THE HOOD ON THIS QUBE, THAT UNOBSERVED, NEW-QUANTA SMELL IS GONE FOREVER.
They make these little pine-scented schroedinggy thingies.
NOT THE SAME


Kevyn, that qubo you Cabbad isn't melting RAC's ice. Brute Force won't work.
I GUESS WE'LL JUST HAVE TO RESORT TO RUBBER HOSE CRYPTO
Rubber hose?
IT'S A DIFFERENT KIND OF BRUTE FORCE ATTACK
HEY HANDSOME GIMME YOUR PASSWORD

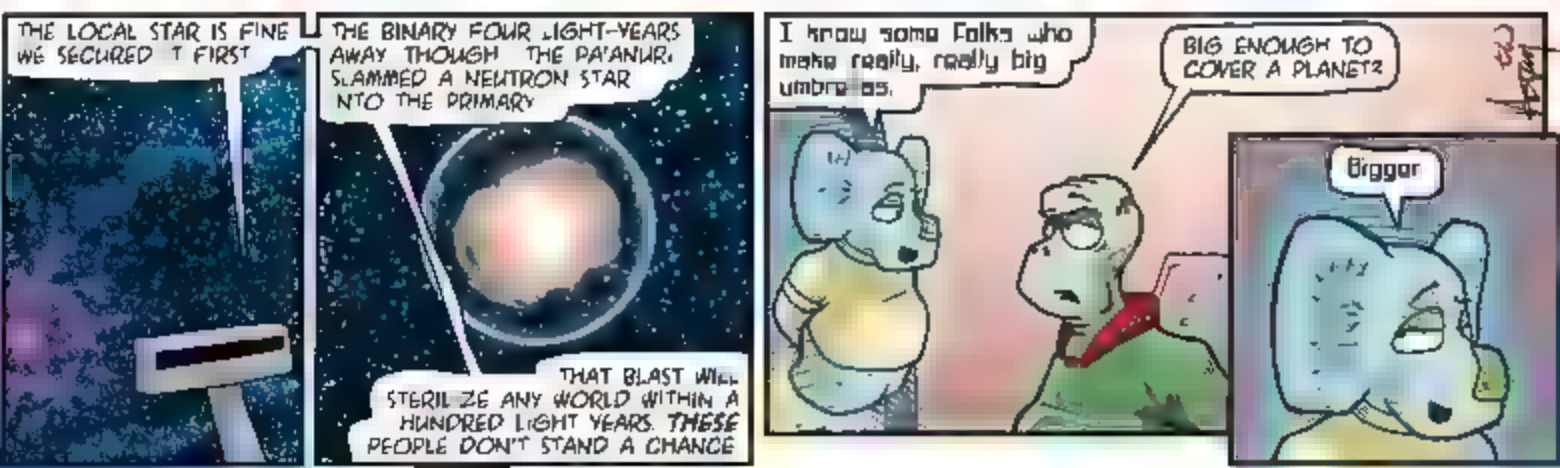

That password Elizabeth gave us works great. I camel-hosed everything in just fine.
WE DO HAVE A LOOSE END TO TAKE CARE OF. THE RENT-A-COP WHO SURRENDERED HIS PASSWORD CAN'T BE ALLOWED TO SPILL THE BEANS.
I'VE GOT GOOD NEWS, HONEY. YOUR BOSS APPROVED YOUR VACATION REQUEST AND SENDS HIS CONGRATULATIONS.

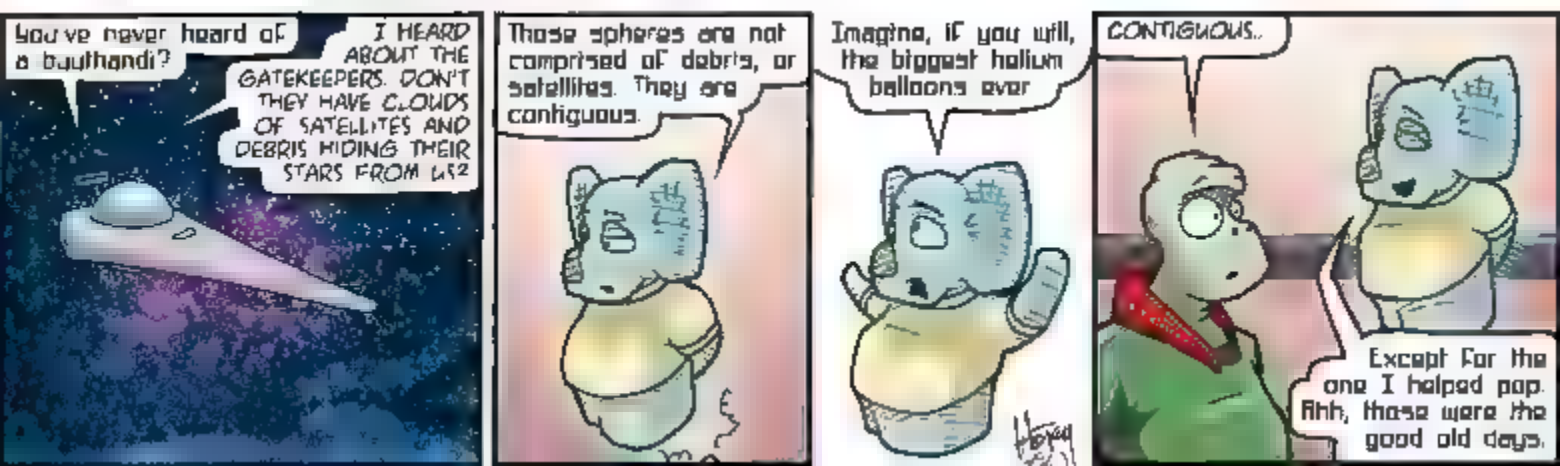
Massey is feeding animal crackers to the ducks in the park.
THAT MEANS HIS PAWNS ARE ALL IN PLACE, THEN.
NOW IT'S TIME TO MOVE THE QUEEN.
HI, SERGE? I'VE CHANGED MY MIND I WOULD LOVE THE CHANCE TO LET YOU GUYS GIVE ME A MAKEOVER. YOU HAVE A STUDIO, RIGHT?

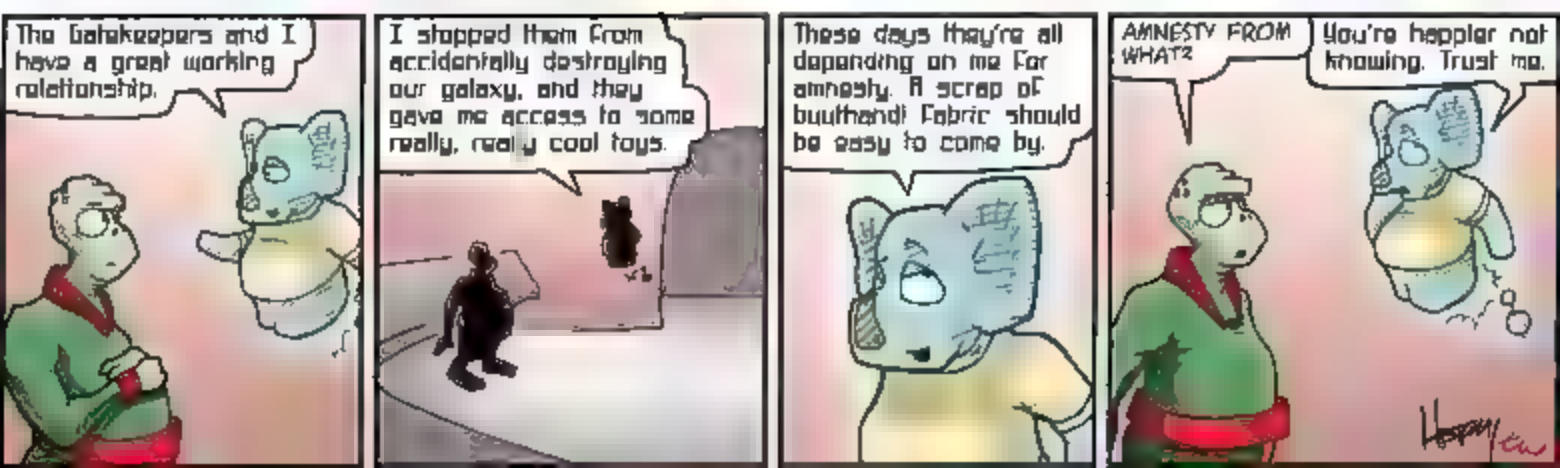

THEY TOOK THE BAIT CAPTAIN.
I AM NOT BAIT I AM THE HOOK
YOU'RE... UMM...
NO, DON T
THEY TOOK THE HOOK CAPTAIN
SUCH A SHINY, DEADLY HOOK. HOW COULD THEY RESIST IT?
MUCH BETTER

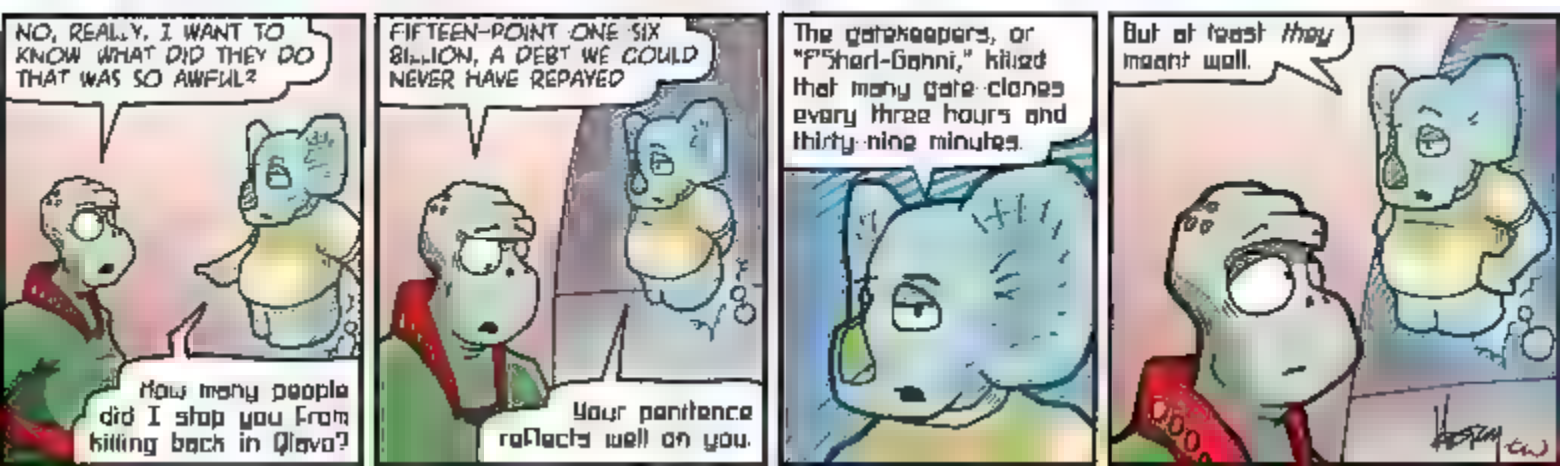

ANDROMEDA ABOARD THE TOHDFRAUG FLAGSHIP IN ORBIT AROUND A WATERY SAPPHIRE OF A WORLD
THEY'RE ALL GOING TO DIE WE'VE FAILED YOU. WE'VE FAILED THEM
It may not be as bad as all that Brief me.
WE USED YOUR RADIO-SHELL TECHNIQUE TO SURVEY FOR INTELLIGENT LIFE.
Schlock Mercenary

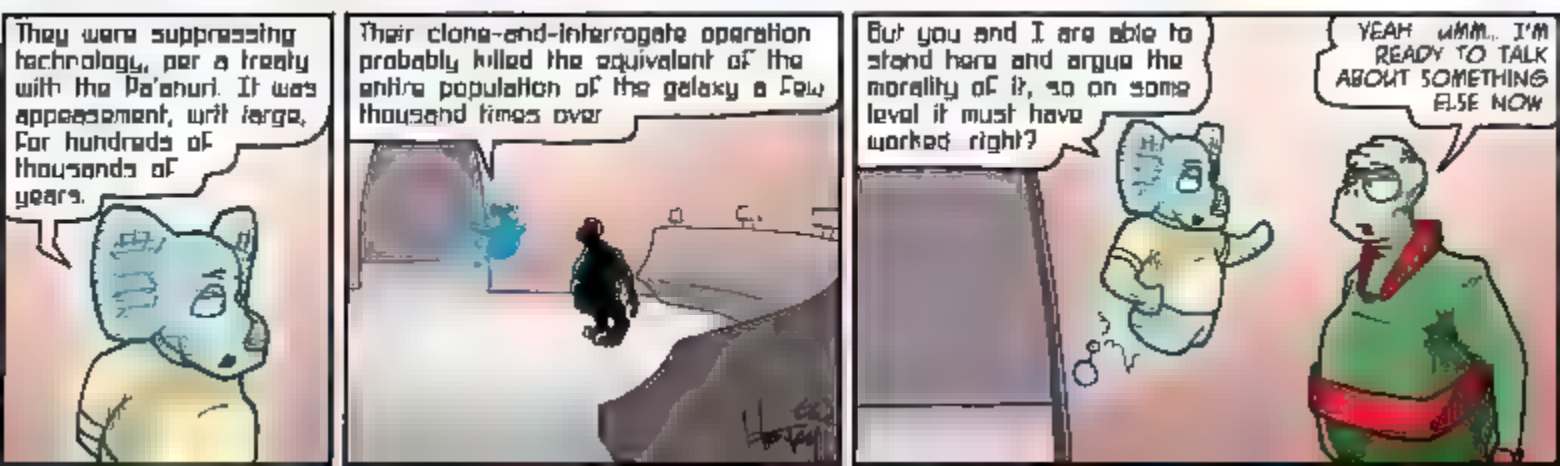
MOST RADIO SHELLS WERE ABOUT 300 LIGHT-YEARS DEEP BEFORE THEY TERMINATED IN SUPERNOVA SHELLS
THE PA'ANURI ARE STILL KILLING WORLDS. WE'VE FOUND DOZENS OF CINDERS THIS WAY SOMETIMES THERE ARE DEAD SPACE STATIONS, TOO
THE PA'ANURI FOUND US, LIKE YOU SAID THEY WOULD BUT THE WEAPONS YOU PROVIDED WERE EFFECTIVE. WE STARTED CLEARING A SECTOR FOR OUR OWN USE, AND THEN WE FOUND THIS WORLD, RIGHT AT THE EDGE OF IT
THESE PEOPLE HAVE UNDERSEA CITIES AND THEY'RE JUST BEGINNING TO FORGE METALS IN DEEP VENTS. THE PA'ANURI WOULDN'T HAVE FOUND THEM FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS
EXCEPT THE PA'ANURI KNEW WE WERE HERE


THE LOCAL STAR IS FINE WE SECURED IT FIRST
THE BINARY FOUR LIGHT-YEARS AWAY THOUGH THE PA'ANUR SLAMMED A NEUTRON STAR INTO THE PRIMARY
THAT BLAST WILL STERILIZE ANY WORLD WITHIN A HUNDRED LIGHT YEARS. THESE PEOPLE DON'T STAND A CHANCE
I know some folks who make really, really big umbrellas.
BIG ENOUGH TO COVER A PLANET?
Bigger

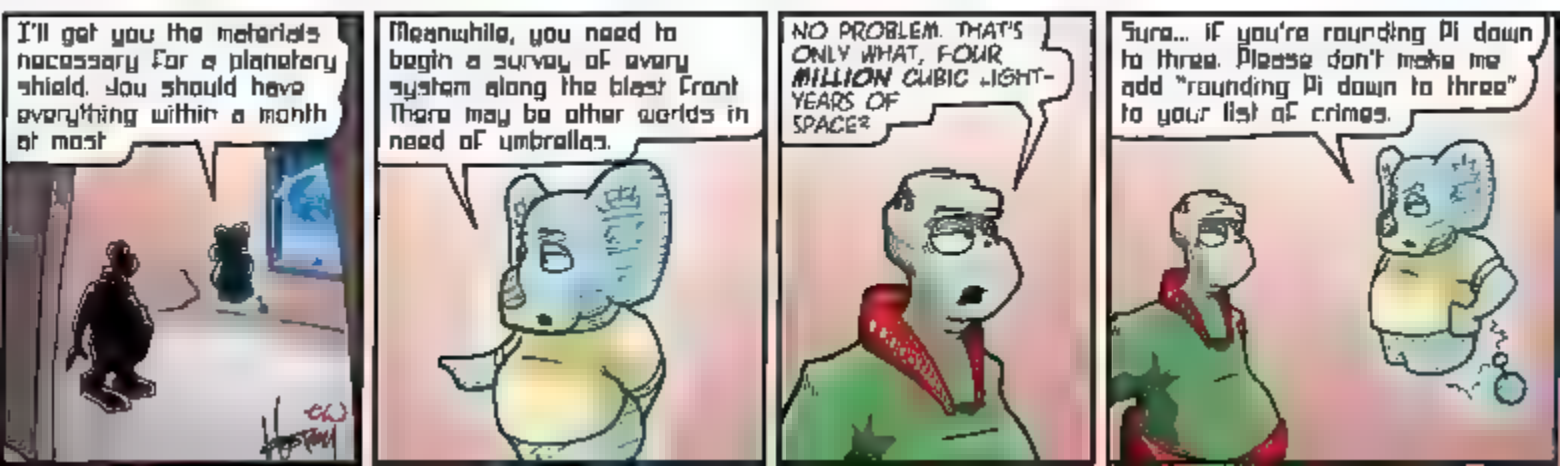

You've never heard of a bauthandi?
I HEARD ABOUT THE GATEKEEPERS. DON'T THEY HAVE CLOUDS OF SATELLITES AND DEBRIS HIDING THEIR STARS FROM US?
Those spheres are not comprised of debris, or satellites. They are contiguous.
Imagine, if you will, the biggest helium balloons ever
CONTIGUOUS..
Except for the one I helped pop. Ahh, those were the good old days.


The Gatekeepers and I have a great working relationship.
I stopped them from accidentally destroying our galaxy, and they gave me access to some really, really cool toys.
These days they're all depending on me for amnesty. A scrap of buuthandi fabric should be easy to come by.
AMNESTY FROM WHAT?
You're happier not knowing. Trust me.

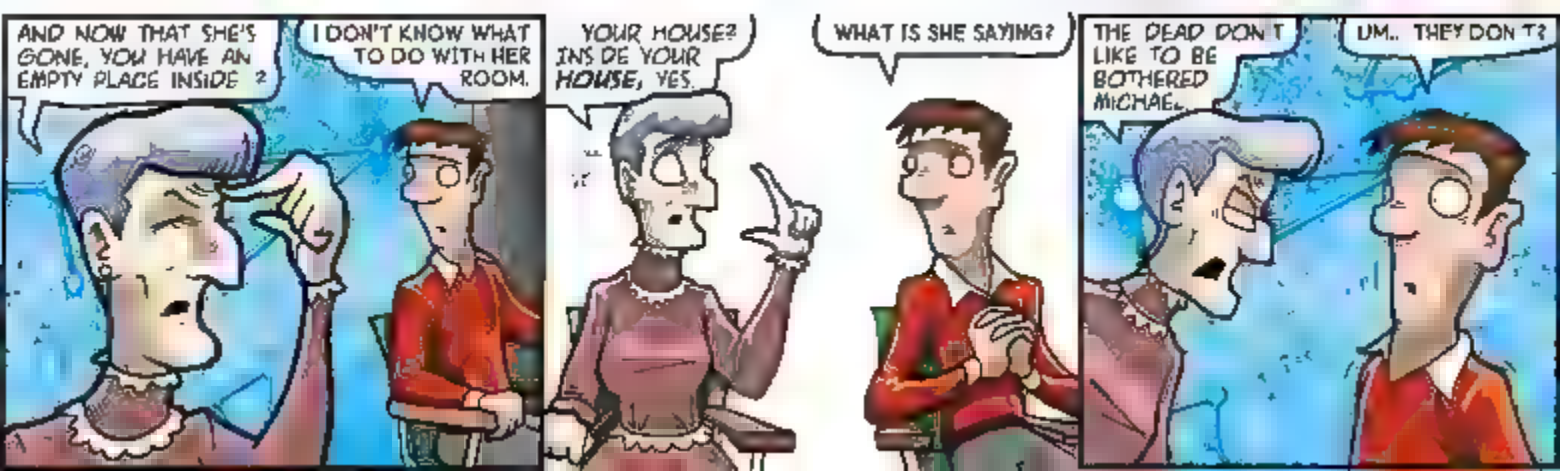

NO, REALLY, I WANT TO KNOW WHAT DID THEY DO THAT WAS SO AWFUL?
How many people did I stop you from killing back in Qlava?
FIFTEEN-POINT ONE SIX BILLION, A DEBT WE COULD NEVER HAVE REPAYED
Your penitence reflects well on you.
The gatekeepers, or "F'Sharl-Gonni," killed that many gate-clones every three hours and thirty-nine minutes.
But at least they meant well.

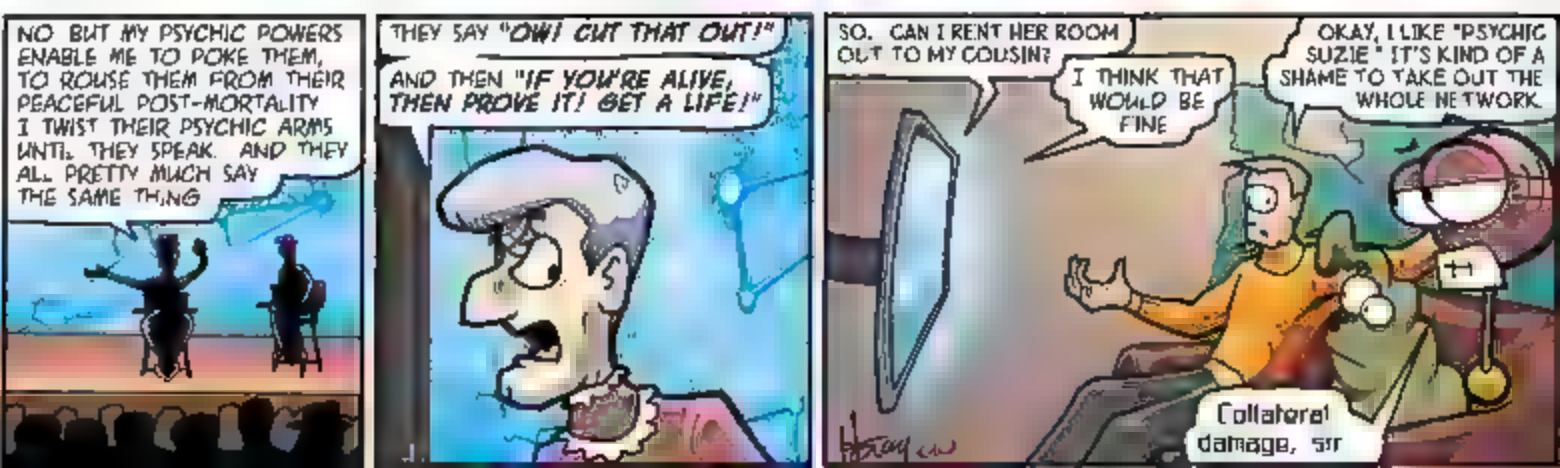

They were suppressing technology, per a treaty with the Pa'ahuri. It was appeasement, writ large, for hundreds of thousands of years.
Their clone-and-interrogate operation probably killed the equivalent of the entire population of the galaxy a few thousand times over
But you and I are able to stand here and argue the morality of it, so on some level it must have worked, right?
YEAH. UMM... I'M READY TO TALK ABOUT SOMETHING ELSE NOW

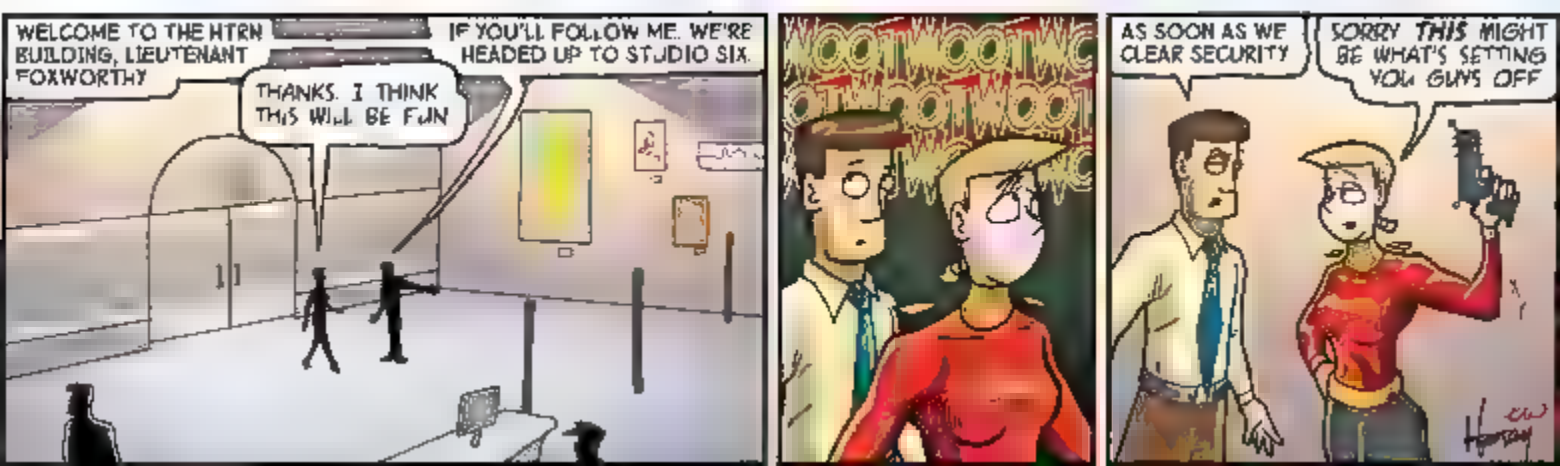
Don't change the subject yet. You need to know the difference between your attempted crimes and the actual, committed crimes of the F'Sherl-Ganni.
They were trying to save all life as we know it from permanent extinction.
You were trying to make a name for yourself by claiming new territory for your own people.
SO. FIFTEEN BILLION CASES OF ATTEMPTED MURDER IS WORSE THAN A HUNDRED THOUSAND TRILLION CASES OF ACTUAL MURDER?
I know, I know. It hardly seems fair.


I'll get you the materials necessary for a planetary shield. You should have everything within a month at most
Meanwhile, you need to begin a survey of every system along the blast front. There may be other worlds in need of umbrellas.
NO PROBLEM. THAT'S ONLY WHAT, FOUR MILLION CUBIC LIGHT-YEARS OF SPACE?
Sure... if you're rounding Pi down to three. Please don't make me add "rounding Pi down to three" to your list of crimes.

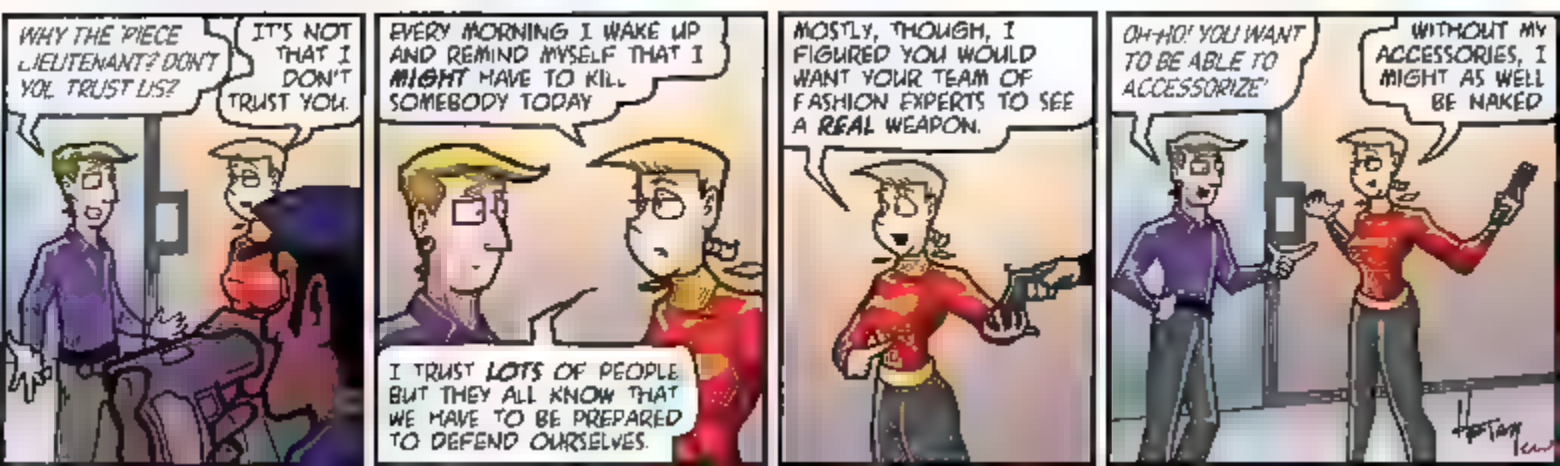
FOLLOWING THE CONCLUSION OF "PSYCHIC SUZIE," STAY TUNED FOR A SPECIAL EDITION OF "GLAMOUR ASSAULT" RIGHT HERE ON HTRN.
MICHAEL, I'M GETTING A NAME LETTERS FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE ALPHABET?
Schlock Mercenary
YEAH.. "MERYL." MY MOTHER'S NAME WAS MERYL.
THAT'S RIGHT, MICHAEL. YOU TWO WERE CLOSE?
UH-HUH. I TOOK CARE OF HER FOR SIX YEARS BEFORE SHE DIED

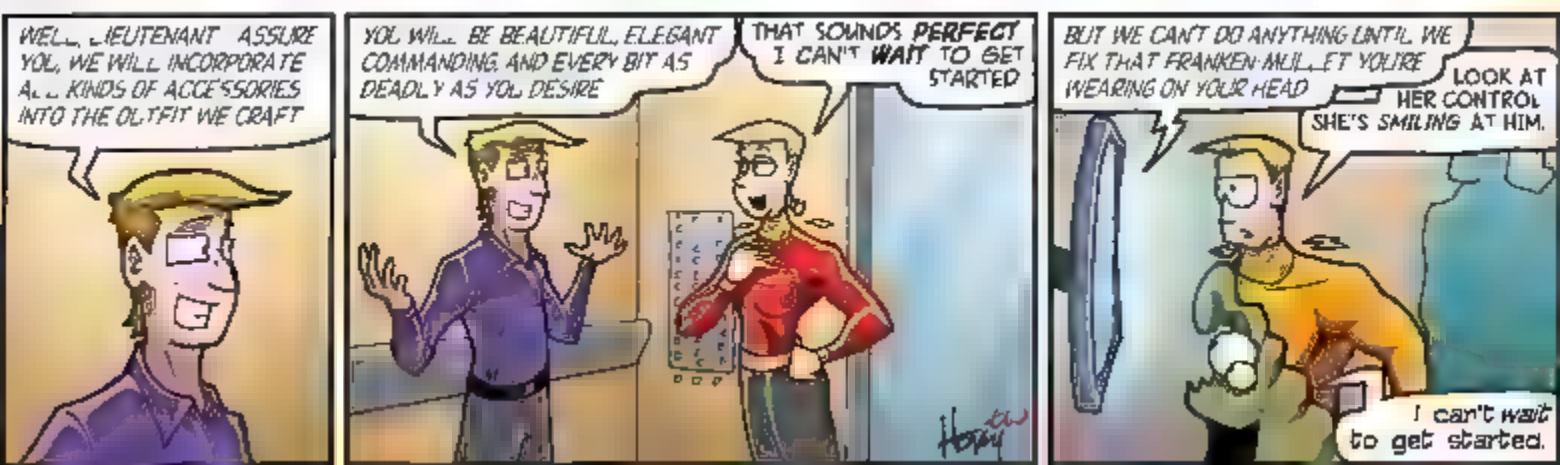

AND NOW THAT SHE'S GONE, YOU HAVE AN EMPTY PLACE INSIDE ?
I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH HER ROOM.
YOUR HOUSE? INSIDE YOUR HOUSE, YES.
WHAT IS SHE SAYING?
THE DEAD DON'T LIKE TO BE BOTHERED MICHAEL.
UM.. THEY DON'T?


NO BUT MY PSYCHIC POWERS ENABLE ME TO POKE THEM, TO ROUSE THEM FROM THEIR PEACEFUL POST-MORTALITY I TWIST THEIR PSYCHIC ARMS UNTIL THEY SPEAK. AND THEY ALL PRETTY MUCH SAY THE SAME THING
THEY SAY "OW! CUT THAT OUT!"
AND THEN "IF YOU'RE ALIVE, THEN PROVE IT! GET A LIFE!"
SO. CAN I RENT HER ROOM OUT TO MY COUSIN?
I THINK THAT WOULD BE FINE
OKAY, I LIKE "PSYCHIC SUZIE" IT'S KIND OF A SHAME TO TAKE OUT THE WHOLE NETWORK.
Collateral damage, sir

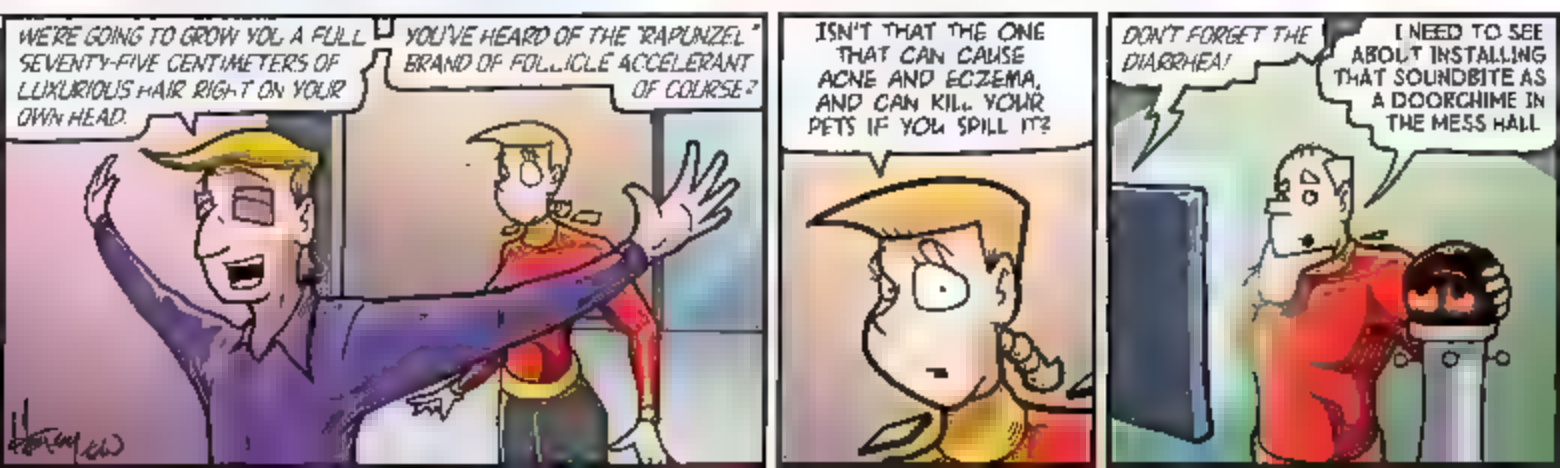

WELCOME TO THE HTRN BUILDING, LIEUTENANT FOXWORTHY
THANKS. I THINK THIS WILL BE FUN
IF YOU'LL FOLLOW ME. WE'RE HEADED UP TO STUDIO SIX.
AS SOON AS WE CLEAR SECURITY
SORRY THIS MIGHT BE WHAT'S SETTING YOU GUYS OFF

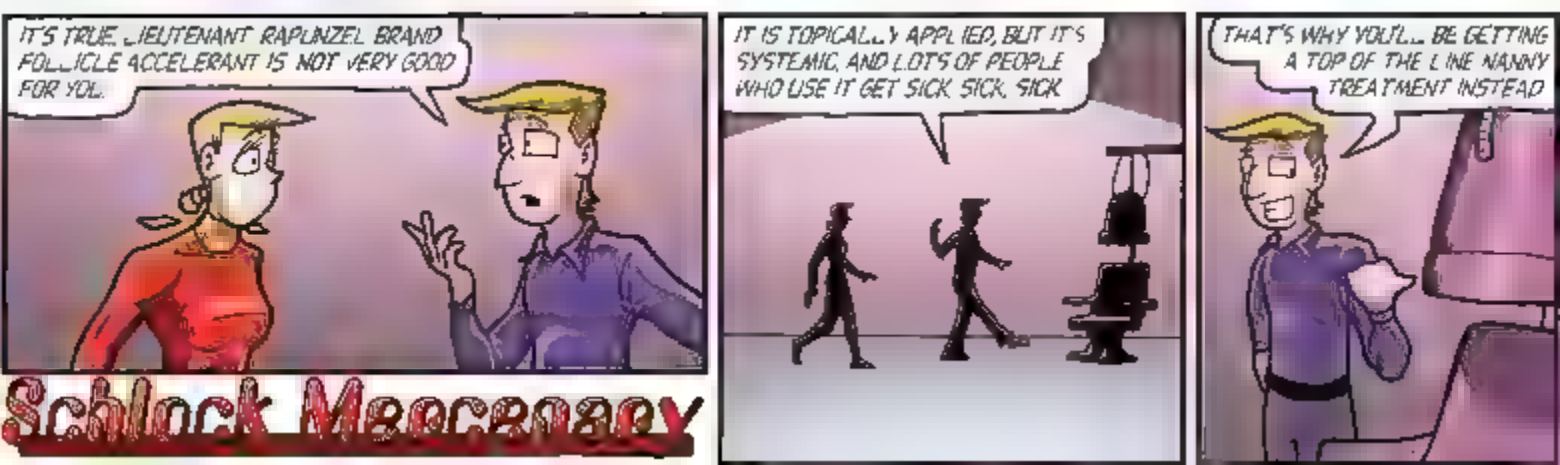
WHERE DID YOU PULL THAT FROM?
MY BELT
IT'S A DUOFORM GEE-GEE ELEVEN FROM STROHL SEMI-FERROUS POLYFORM, CARBONAN BARREL. IT'S PERFECT FOR CONCEALED-CARRY
USUALLY IT SLIPS RIGHT THROUGH SECURITY, THOUGH. YOU GUYS ARE [redacted]
WE'D RATHER YOU NOT FINISH THAT PROCTO WORK ON SERGE BALLISTICALLY
I'M HOPING SHE DECIDES NOT TO FINISH IT AT ALL.


WHY THE PIECE LIEUTENANT? DON'T YOU TRUST US?
IT'S NOT THAT I DON'T TRUST YOU.
EVERY MORNING I WAKE UP AND REMIND MYSELF THAT I MIGHT HAVE TO KILL SOMEBODY TODAY.
I TRUST LOTS OF PEOPLE BUT THEY ALL KNOW THAT WE HAVE TO BE PREPARED TO DEFEND OURSELVES.
MOSTLY, THOUGH, I FIGURED YOU WOULD WANT YOUR TEAM OF FASHION EXPERTS TO SEE A REAL WEAPON.
OH-HO! YOU WANT TO BE ABLE TO ACCESSORIZE?
WITHOUT MY ACCESSORIES, I MIGHT AS WELL BE NAKED.

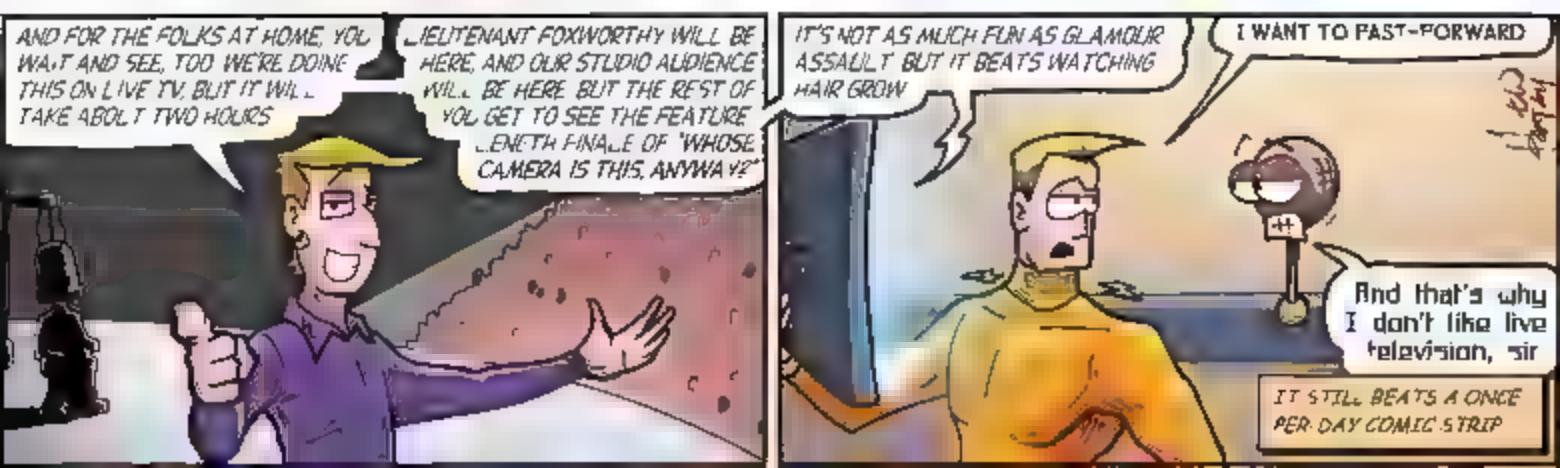

WELL, LIEUTENANT ASSURE YOU, WE WILL INCORPORATE ALL KINDS OF ACCESSORIES INTO THE OUTFIT WE CRAFT
YOU WILL BE BEAUTIFUL, ELEGANT COMMANDING, AND EVERY BIT AS DEADLY AS YOU DESIRE
THAT SOUNDS PERFECT I CAN'T WAIT TO GET STARTED
BUT WE CAN'T DO ANYTHING UNTIL WE FIX THAT FRANKEN-MULLET YOU'RE WEARING ON YOUR HEAD
LOOK AT HER CONTROL SHE'S SMILING AT HIM.
I can't wait to get started.

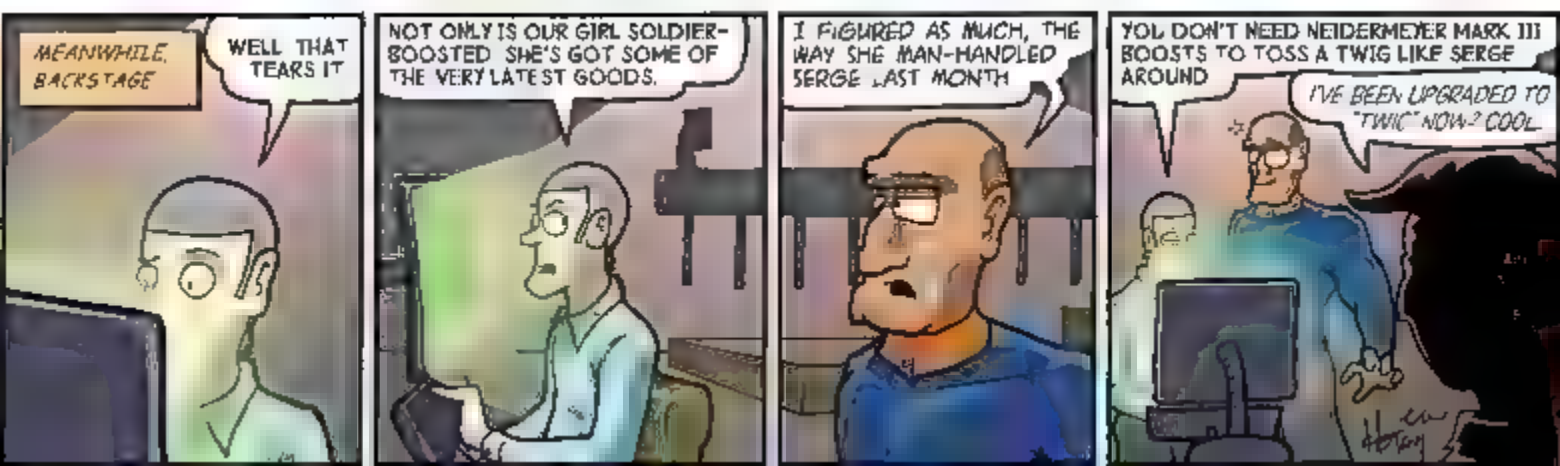
I DON'T THINK THERE'S MUCH YOU CAN DO WITH MY HAIR AS SHORT AS IT IS UNLESS YOU WANT TO SHAVE MY HEAD AND GIVE ME A WIG.
MY DEAR LIEUTENANT, YOU'VE AMAZED US WITH YOUR MARTIAL PROWESS, AND THE GADGETRY OF YOUR TRADE
NOW LET US AMAZE YOU... WITH FASHION TOOLS ONLY AVAILABLE TO THE FLAKYMOST LAYER OF SOCIETY'S UPPER CRUST
DID HE JUST SAY "FLAKYMOST?"
Death is too good for this one

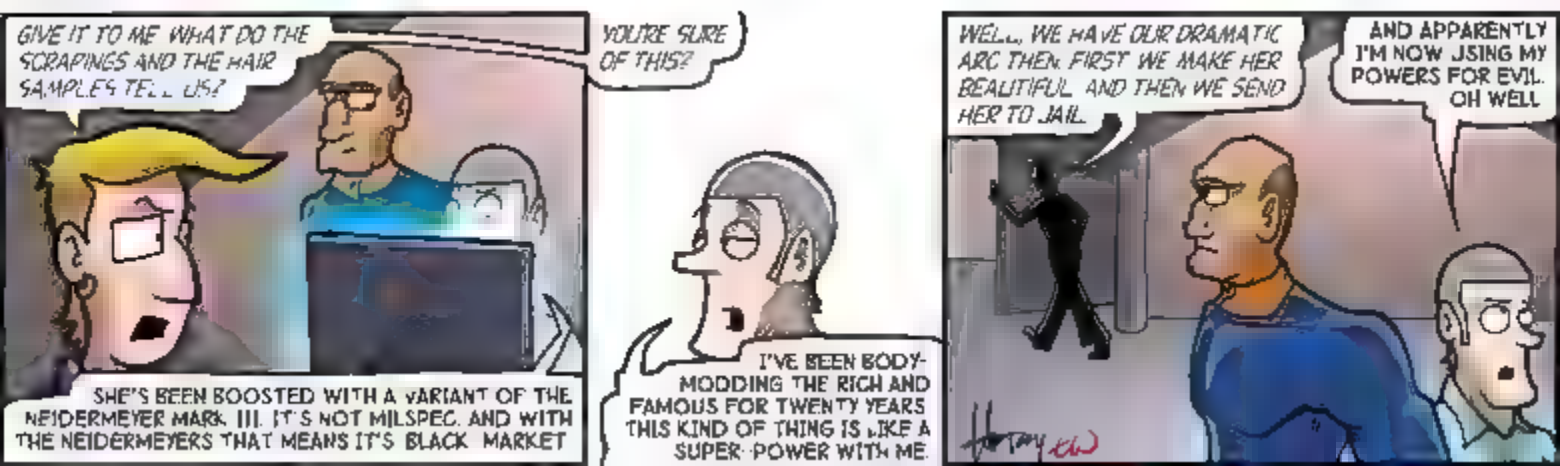

WE'RE GOING TO GROW YOU A FULL SEVENTY-FIVE CENTIMETERS OF LUXURIOUS HAIR RIGHT ON YOUR OWN HEAD.
YOU'VE HEARD OF THE "RAPUNZEL" BRAND OF FOLLICLE ACCELERANT OF COURSE?
ISN'T THAT THE ONE THAT CAN CAUSE ACNE AND ECZEMA, AND CAN KILL YOUR PETS IF YOU SPILL IT?
DON'T FORGET THE DIARRHEA!
I NEED TO SEE ABOUT INSTALLING THAT SOUNDBITE AS A DOORCHIME IN THE MESS HALL

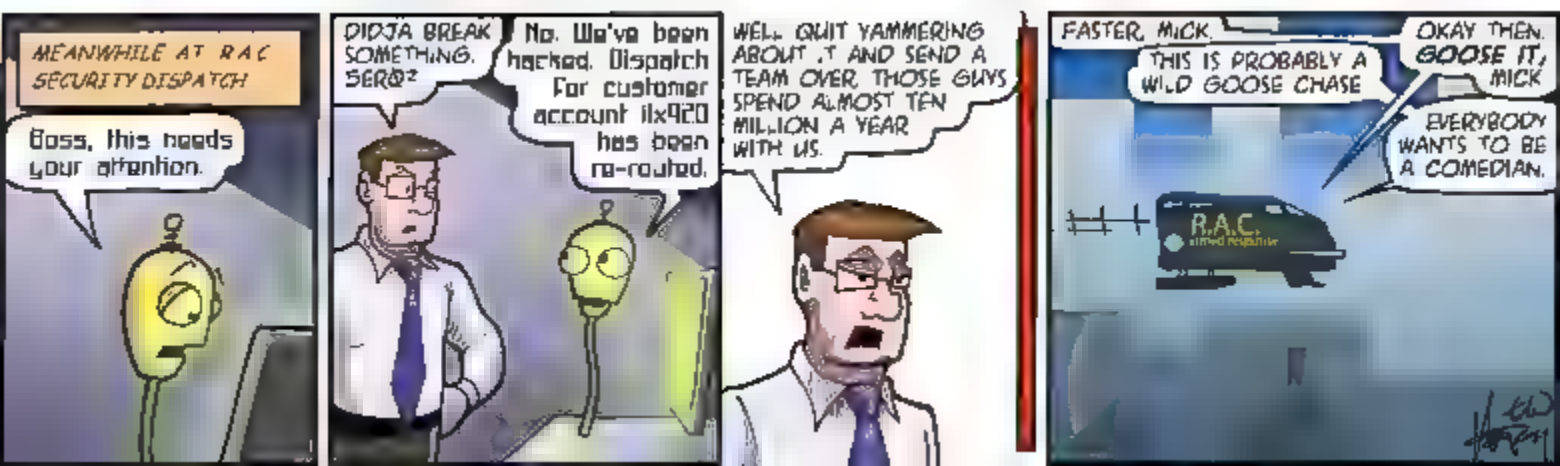

IT'S TRUE, LIEUTENANT RAPUNZEL BRAND FOLLICLE ACCELERANT IS NOT VERY GOOD FOR YOU.
Schlock Mercenary
IT IS TOPICALLY APPLIED, BUT IT'S SYSTEMIC, AND LOTS OF PEOPLE WHO USE IT GET SICK, SICK, SICK
THAT'S WHY YOU'LL BE GETTING A TOP OF THE LINE NANNY TREATMENT INSTEAD

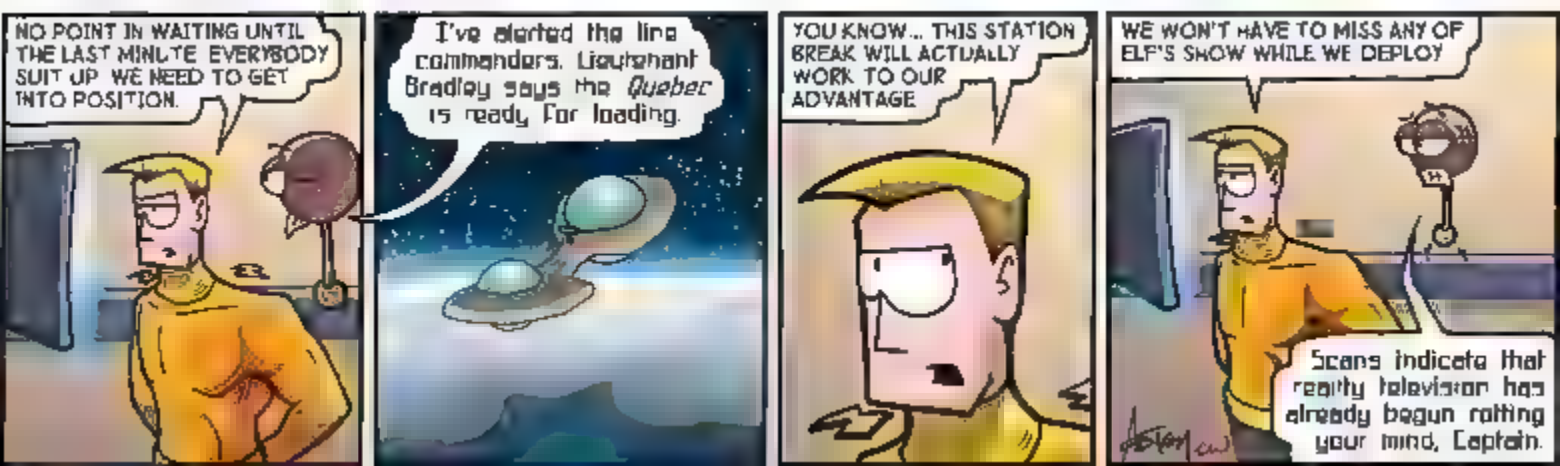
BILLIONS AND BILLIONS OF NANOBOTS WILL CREATE HAIR FOR YOU FROM A TEMPLATE LIFTED FROM YOUR FOLLICLES. THE HAIR WILL BE JUST AS MUCH YOURS AS IF YOU'D SPENT YEARS GROWING IT OUT YOURSELF
WELL... ALMOST. YOU SEE, IT'LL BE HEALTHIER. NO WEAR-AND-TEAR. NO SPLIT ENDS. NO IN-AND-OUT COLOR TREATMENTS. JUST ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY CENTIMETERS OF SOLID, STRAWBERRY-BLOND GOLD
I THOUGHT YOU SAID WE WERE DOING SEVENTY-FIVE CENTIMETERS
WAIT TILL YOU SEE WHAT THAT EXTRA LENGTH DOES, LITTLE LADY


AND FOR THE FOLKS AT HOME, YOU WAIT AND SEE, TOO WE'RE DOING THIS ON LIVE TV, BUT IT WILL TAKE ABOUT TWO HOURS
LIEUTENANT FOXWORTHY WILL BE HERE, AND OUR STUDIO AUDIENCE WILL BE HERE BUT THE REST OF YOU GET TO SEE THE FEATURE LENGTH FINALE OF "WHOSE CAMERA IS THIS, ANYWAY?"
IT'S NOT AS MUCH FUN AS GLAMOUR ASSAULT BUT IT BEATS WATCHING HAIR GROW
I WANT TO FAST-FORWARD
And that's why I don't like live television, sir
IT STILL BEATS A ONCE PER DAY COMIC STRIP


MEANWHILE, BACKSTAGE
WELL THAT TEARS IT
NOT ONLY IS OUR GIRL SOLDIER-BOOSTED SHE'S GOT SOME OF THE VERY LATEST GOODS.
I FIGURED AS MUCH, THE WAY SHE MAN-HANDLED SERGE LAST MONTH
YOU DON'T NEED NEIDERMEYER MARK III BOOSTS TO TOSS A TWIG LIKE SERGE AROUND
I'VE BEEN UPGRADED TO "TWIG" NOW-? COOL


GIVE IT TO ME WHAT DO THE SCRAPINGS AND THE HAIR SAMPLES TELL US?
SHE'S BEEN BOOSTED WITH A VARIANT OF THE NEIDERMEYER MARK III. IT'S NOT MILSPEC. AND WITH THE NEIDERMEYERS THAT MEANS IT'S BLACK MARKET
YOU'RE SURE OF THIS?
I'VE BEEN BODY-MODDING THE RICH AND FAMOUS FOR TWENTY YEARS THIS KIND OF THING IS LIKE A SUPER-POWER WITH ME.
WELL, WE HAVE OUR DRAMATIC ARC THEN. FIRST WE MAKE HER BEAUTIFUL. AND THEN WE SEND HER TO JAIL.
AND APPARENTLY I'M NOW USING MY POWERS FOR EVIL. OH WELL

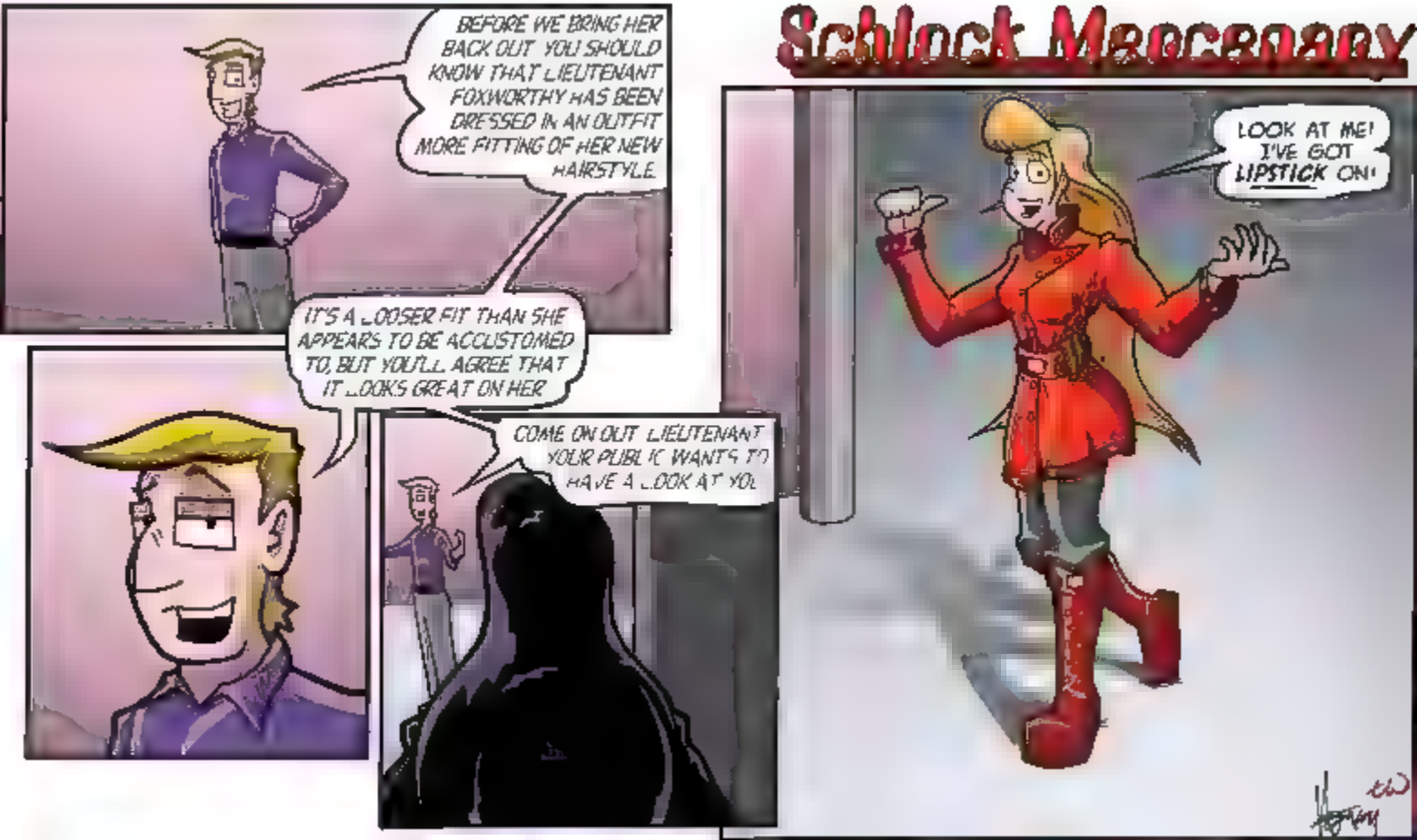

MEANWHILE AT R.A.C. SECURITY DISPATCH
Boss, this needs your attention.
DIDJA BREAK SOMETHING, SER@?
No. We've been hacked. Dispatch for customer account ilx420 has been re-routed.
WELL QUIT YAMMERING ABOUT IT AND SEND A TEAM OVER. THOSE GUYS SPEND ALMOST TEN MILLION A YEAR WITH US.
FASTER, MICK.
THIS IS PROBABLY A WILD GOOSE CHASE
OKAY THEN. GOOSE IT, MICK
EVERYBODY WANTS TO BE A COMEDIAN.
R.A.C.

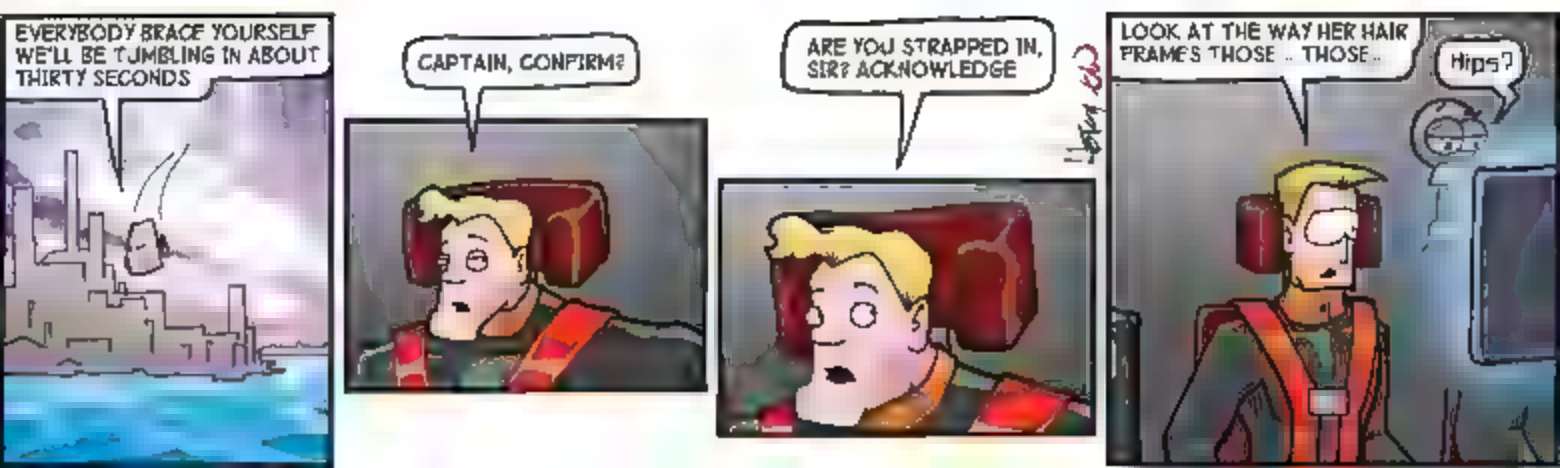

NO POINT IN WAITING UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE. EVERYBODY SUIT UP. WE NEED TO GET INTO POSITION.
I've alerted the line commanders. Lieutenant Bradley says the *Quebec* is ready for loading.
YOU KNOW... THIS STATION BREAK WILL ACTUALLY WORK TO OUR ADVANTAGE.
WE WON'T HAVE TO MISS ANY OF ELF'S SHOW WHILE WE DEPLOY.
Scans indicate that reality television has already begun rotting your mind, Captain.

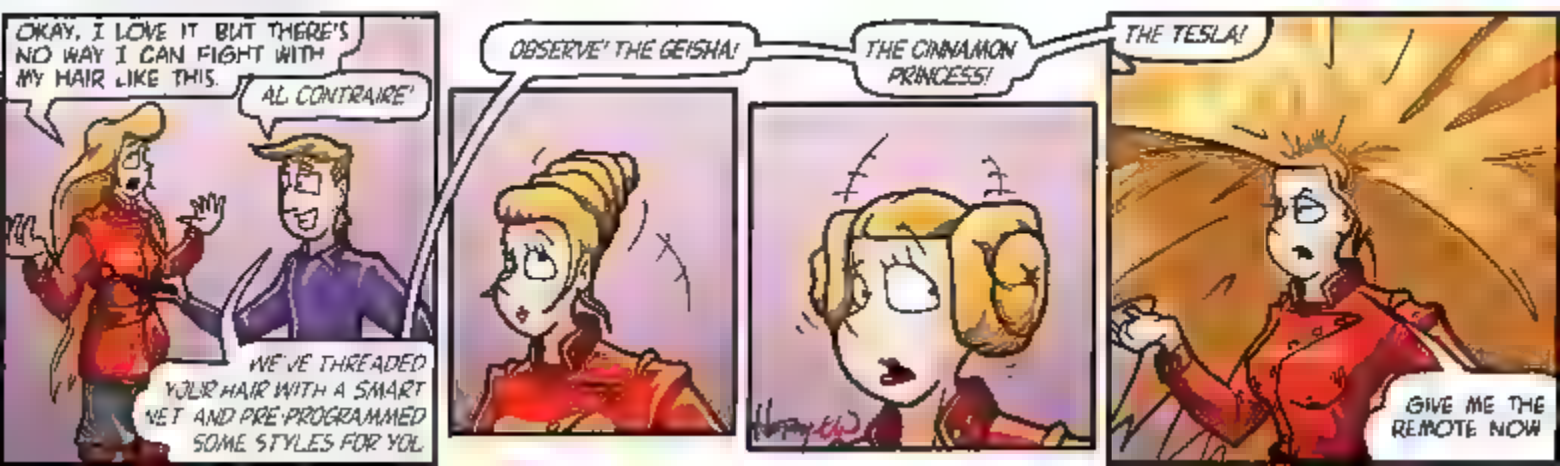
THIS IS ROMEO-PAPA-CHARLIE-ONE SIX INBOUND TO SAN ASIMOV REQUESTING CLEARANCE
ROGER THAT ROMEO-PAPA-CHARLIE YOU ARE CLEARED FOR APPROACH TO PAD BRAVO ELEVEN, THAT'S BRAVO-ONE-ONE. CONFIRM
PAD BRAVO ELEVEN CONFIRMED WE ARE ON APPROACH.
THAT POOR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER IS GOING TO NEED NEW PANTS WHEN WE EXPLODE A HUNDRED METERS UP
HE'S NOT THE ONLY ONE.
T'LL BE FUN SIR I PROMISE

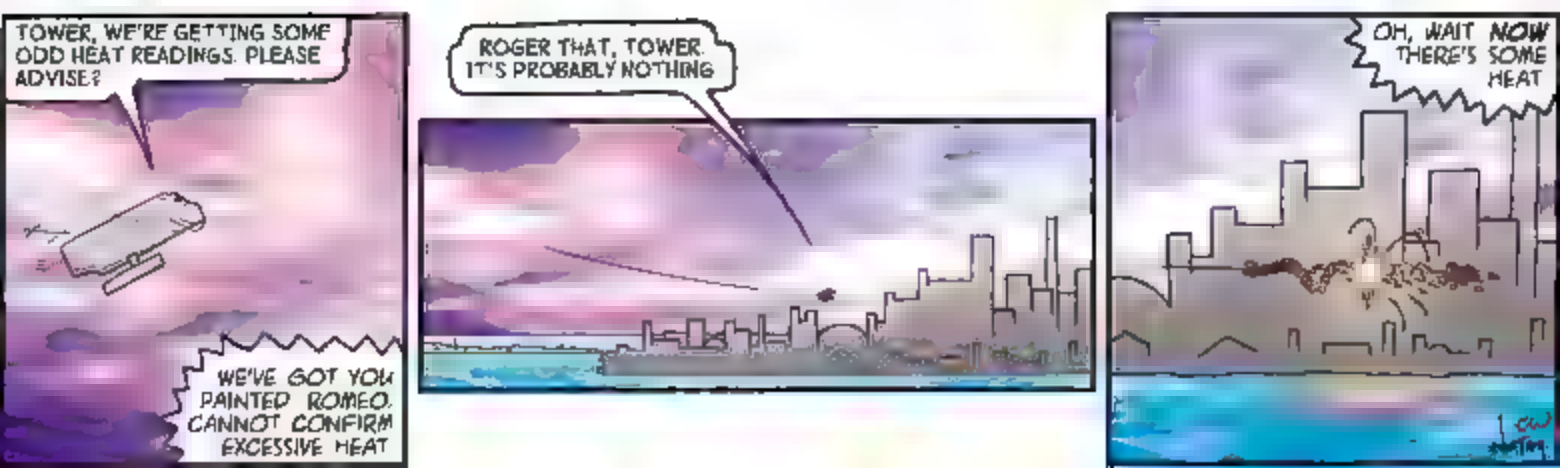
WELL, LIEUTENANT FOXWORTHY IT'S ALMOST TIME. ARE YOU READY TO SEE YOUR HAIR?
I AM. I'M EXCITED, SERGE
THE AUDIENCE IS EXCITED TOO. YOU'VE GOT FANS RINGING THE PHONES OFF THE HOOK ALREADY
SO LET'S ALL HAVE A LOOK AT YOUR HAIR!
UMMM. THAT'S THE PONYTAIL YOU CUT OFF
I KNOW I'M SUCH A KIDDER! IT'LL TAKE US A FEW MINUTES TO GET YOU AND YOUR NEW HAIR READY FOR DISPLAY
HTRN VIEWERS PRESS "ONE" NOW TO VOTE SERGE OFF THE PLANET

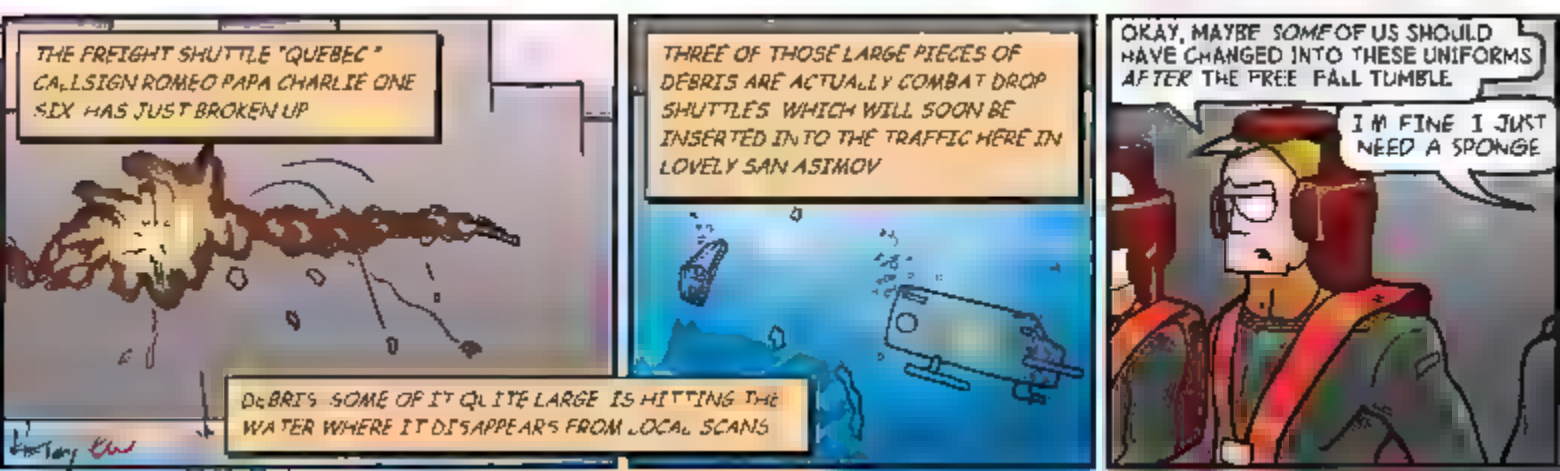
Schlock Mercenary

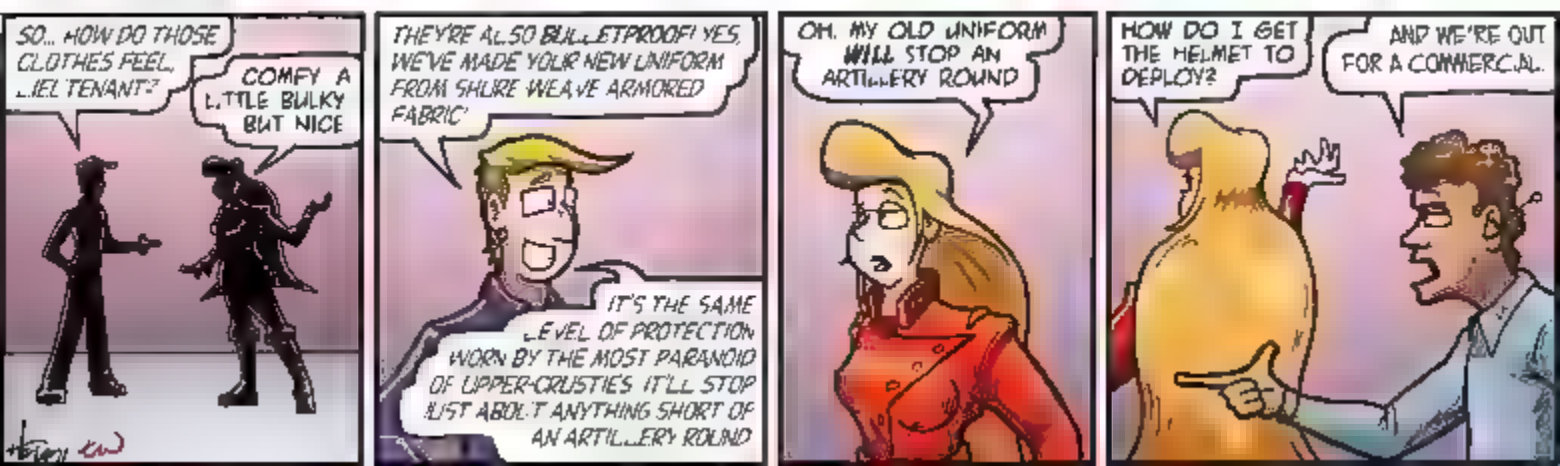


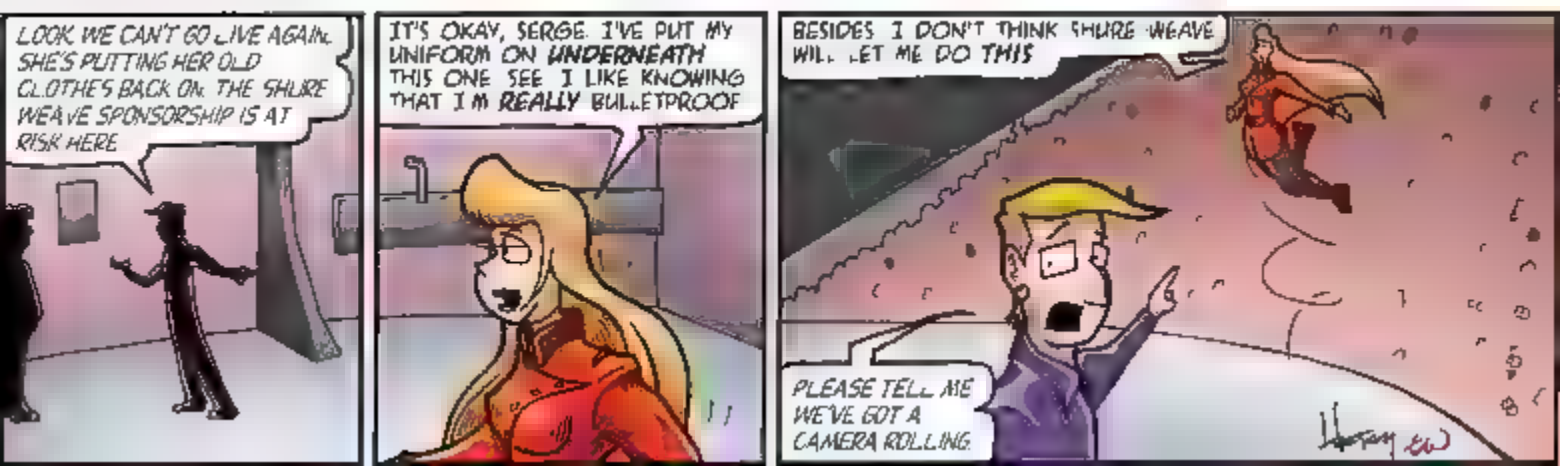

EVERYBODY BRACE YOURSELF WE'LL BE TUMBLING IN ABOUT THIRTY SECONDS
CAPTAIN, CONFIRM?
ARE YOU STRAPPED IN, SIR? ACKNOWLEDGE
LOOK AT THE WAY HER HAIR FRAMES THOSE .. THOSE ..
Hips?

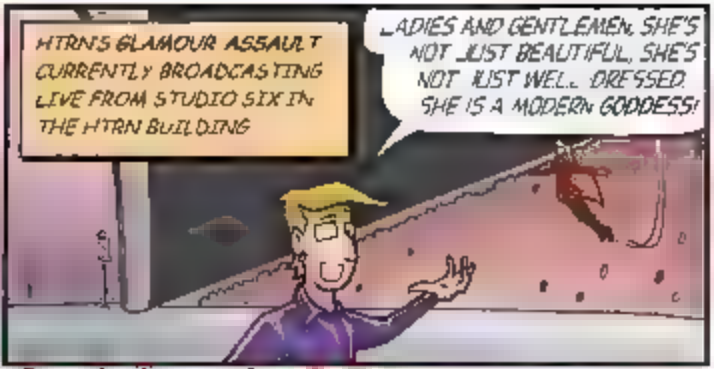

OKAY, I LOVE IT BUT THERE'S NO WAY I CAN FIGHT WITH MY HAIR LIKE THIS.
AL CONTRAIRE!
WE'VE THREADED YOUR HAIR WITH A SMART NET AND PRE-PROGRAMMED SOME STYLES FOR YOU.
OBSERVE! THE GEISHA!
THE CINNAMON PRINCESS!
THE TESLA!
GIVE ME THE REMOTE NOW


TOWER, WE'RE GETTING SOME ODD HEAT READINGS. PLEASE ADVISE?
WE'VE GOT YOU PAINTED ROMEO. CANNOT CONFIRM EXCESSIVE HEAT
ROGER THAT, TOWER. IT'S PROBABLY NOTHING
OH, WAIT NOW THERE'S SOME HEAT


THE FREIGHT SHUTTLE "QUEBEC" CALLSIGN ROMEO PAPA CHARLIE ONE SIX HAS JUST BROKEN UP
DEBRIS SOME OF IT QUITE LARGE IS HITTING THE WATER WHERE IT DISAPPEARS FROM LOCAL SCANS
THREE OF THOSE LARGE PIECES OF DEBRIS ARE ACTUALLY COMBAT DROP SHUTTLES WHICH WILL SOON BE INSERTED INTO THE TRAFFIC HERE IN LOVELY SAN ASIMOV
OKAY, MAYBE SOME OF US SHOULD HAVE CHANGED INTO THESE UNIFORMS AFTER THE FREE FALL TUMBLE
I'M FINE I JUST NEED A SPONGE

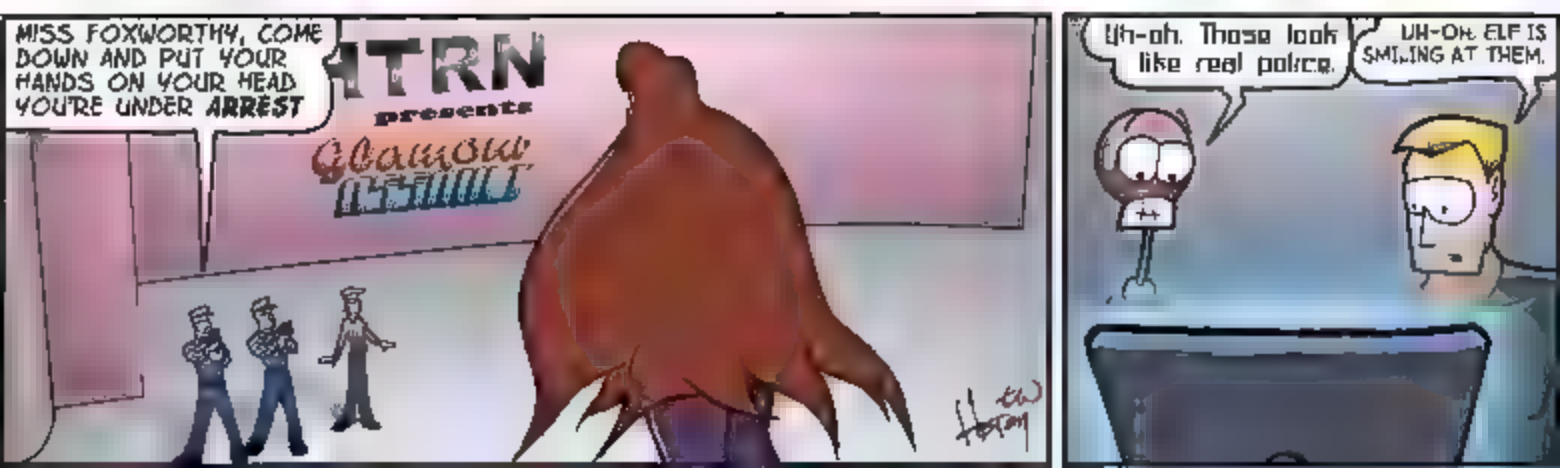

SO... HOW DO THOSE CLOTHES FEEL, LIEUTENANT?
COMFY A LITTLE BULKY BUT NICE
THEY'RE ALSO BULLETPROOF! YES, WE'VE MADE YOUR NEW UNIFORM FROM SHURE WEAVE ARMORED FABRIC!
IT'S THE SAME LEVEL OF PROTECTION WORN BY THE MOST PARANOID OF UPPER-CRUSTIES. IT'LL STOP JUST ABOUT ANYTHING SHORT OF AN ARTILLERY ROUND
OH. MY OLD UNIFORM WILL STOP AN ARTILLERY ROUND
HOW DO I GET THE HELMET TO DEPLOY?
AND WE'RE OUT FOR A COMMERCIAL.

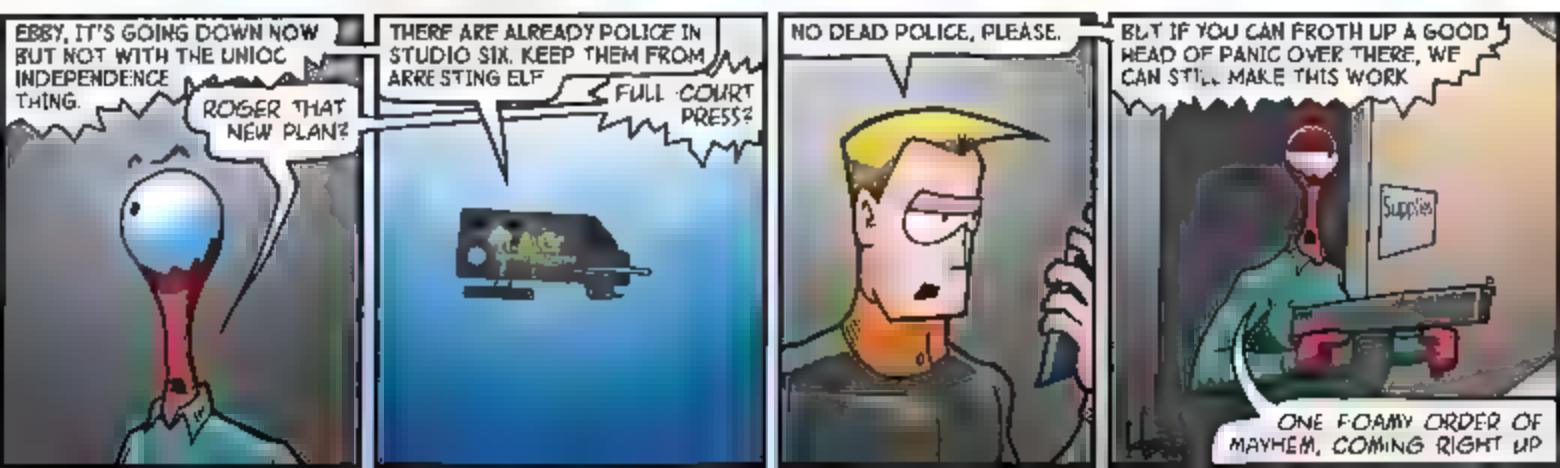

LOOK WE CAN'T GO LIVE AGAIN. SHE'S PUTTING HER OLD CLOTHES BACK ON. THE SHURE WEAVE SPONSORSHIP IS AT RISK HERE
IT'S OKAY, SERGE. I'VE PUT MY UNIFORM ON UNDERNEATH THIS ONE. SEE I LIKE KNOWING THAT I'M REALLY BULLETPROOF
BESIDES I DON'T THINK SHURE WEAVE WILL LET ME DO THIS
PLEASE TELL ME WE'VE GOT A CAMERA ROLLING

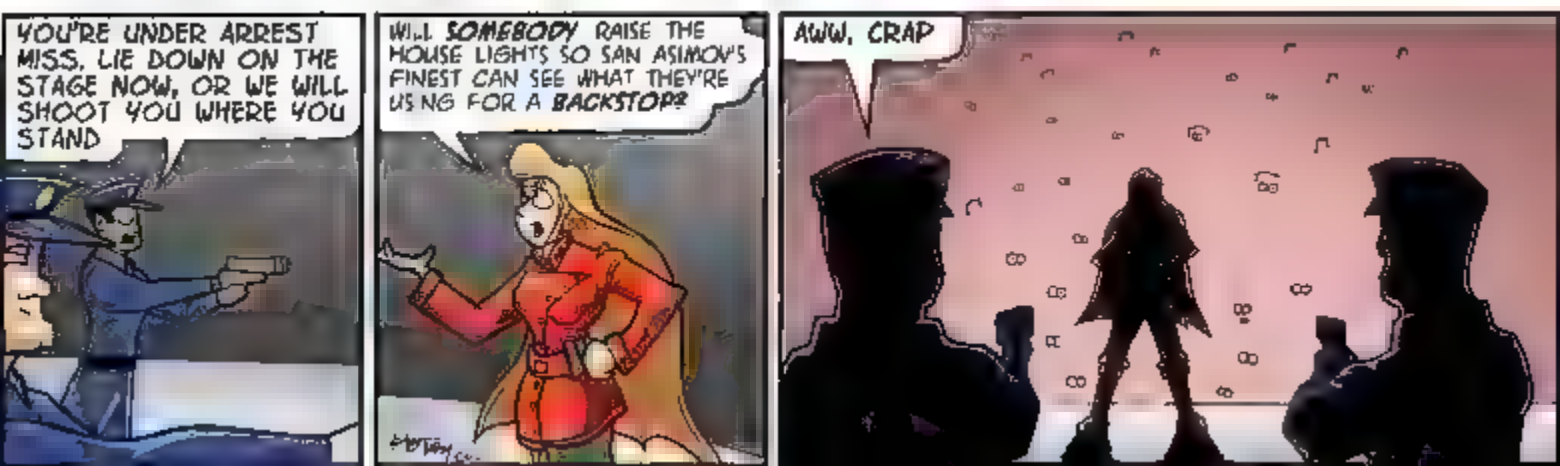


Schlock Mercenary

LISTEN, SERGE... THAT HOT LITTLE NUMBER IS A WALKING, TALKING WEAPON
AND FLYING. DON'T FORGET THE FLYING PART
RIGHT. A WALKING, TALKING, FLYING WEAPON.
AND SHE'S UNREGISTERED. WE NEED TO GET HER OFF THE STREETS, AND THEN WE NEED TO FIND OUT WHO DID THIS TO HER.
SERGE? WHAT'S GOING ON OVER THERE?

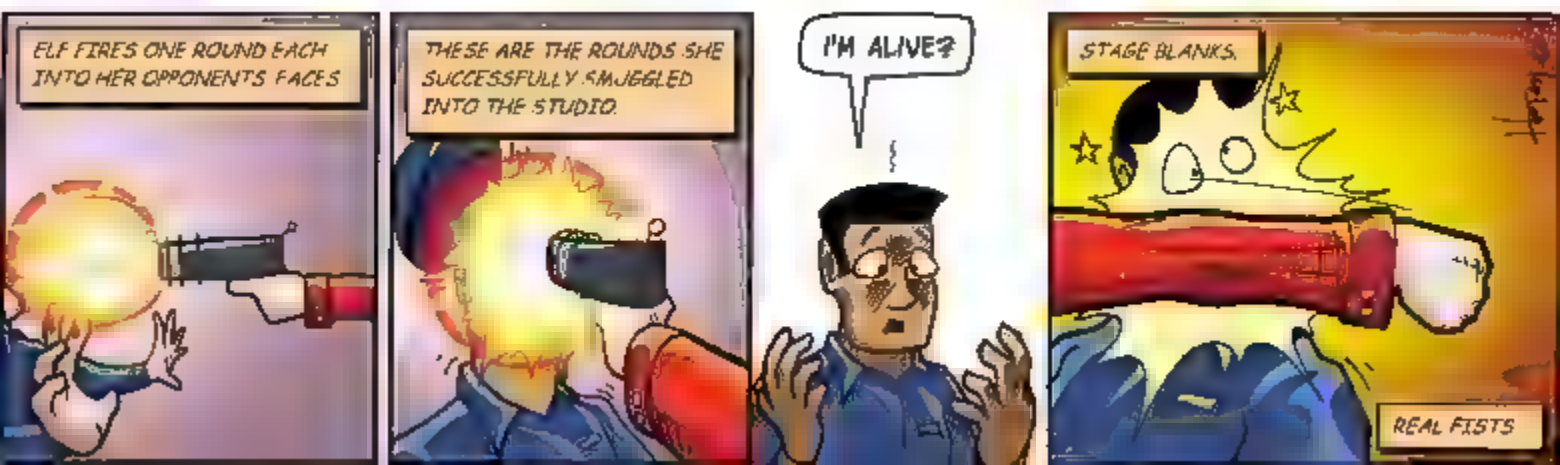

MISS FOXWORTHY, COME DOWN AND PUT YOUR HANDS ON YOUR HEAD YOU'RE UNDER ARREST
HTRN
presents
Uh-oh. Those look like real police.
UH-OH. ELF IS SMILING AT THEM.


EBBY, IT'S GOING DOWN NOW BUT NOT WITH THE UNIOC INDEPENDENCE THING.
ROGER THAT NEW PLAN?
THERE ARE ALREADY POLICE IN STUDIO SIX. KEEP THEM FROM ARRESTING ELF
FULL COURT PRESS?
NO DEAD POLICE, PLEASE.
BUT IF YOU CAN FROTH UP A GOOD HEAD OF PANIC OVER THERE, WE CAN STILL MAKE THIS WORK
Supplies
ONE FOAMY ORDER OF MAYHEM, COMING RIGHT UP

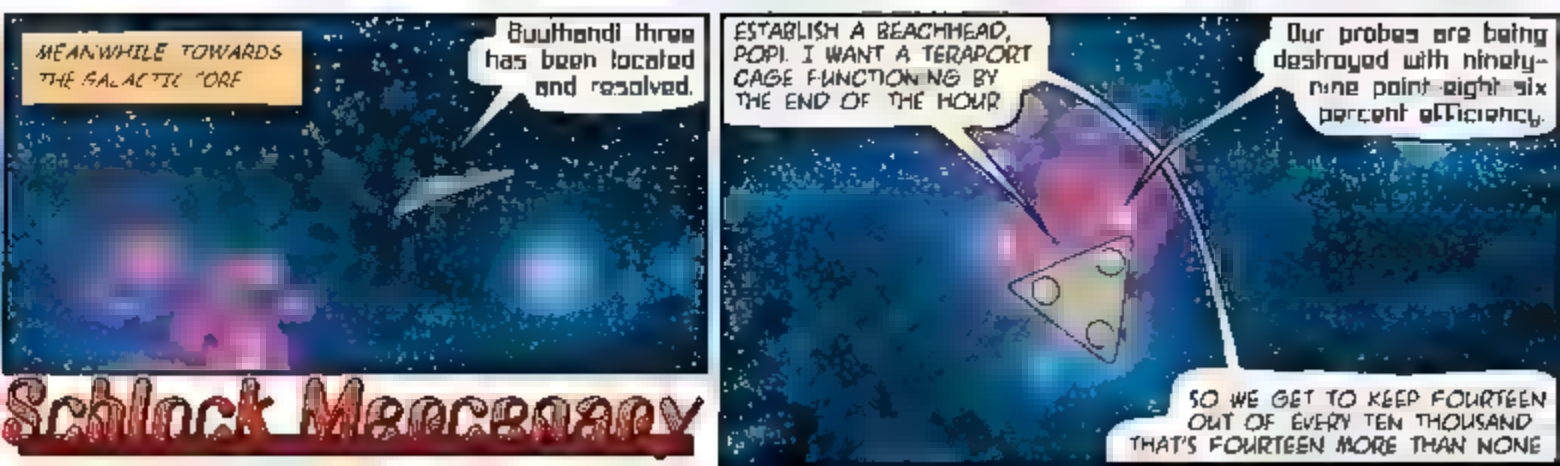

YOU'RE UNDER ARREST MISS. LIE DOWN ON THE STAGE NOW, OR WE WILL SHOOT YOU WHERE YOU STAND
WILL SOMEBODY RAISE THE HOUSE LIGHTS SO SAN ASIMOV'S FINEST CAN SEE WHAT THEY'RE USING FOR A BACKSTOP?
AWW, CRAP

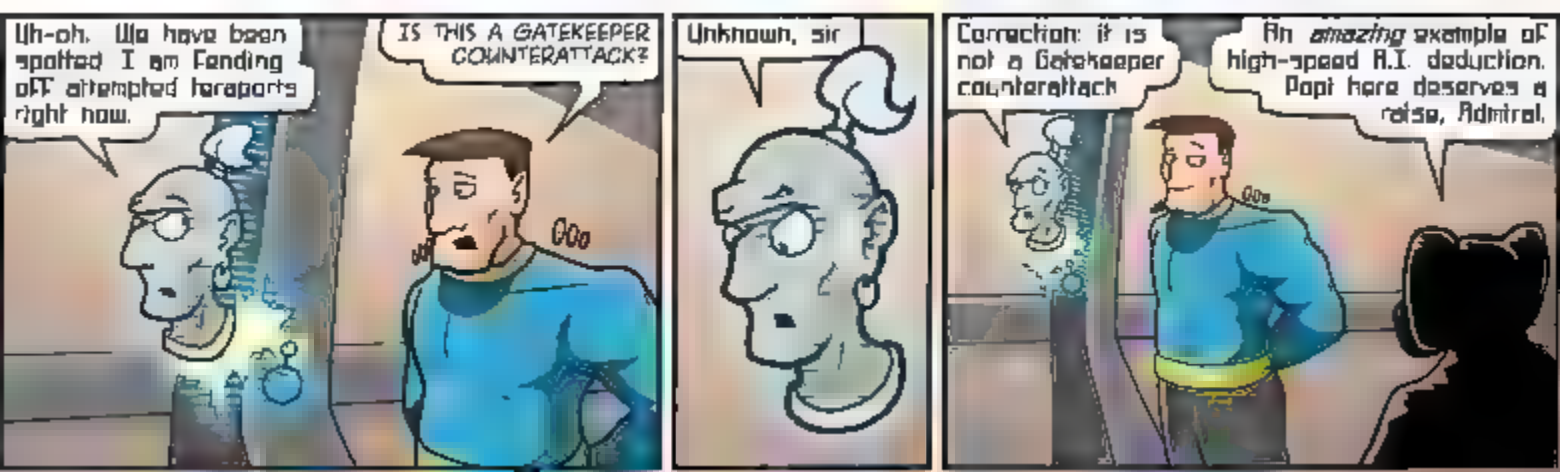
LADY, I KNOW YOU THINK YOU'RE TOUGH WITH THOSE SOLDIER BOOSTS.
MY PARTNER AND I ARE BOTH EX-MILITARY WE'RE BOOSTED AND LICENSED. AND VERY, VERY SEASONED.
IF YOU MAKE US DO THIS THE HARD WAY, WE WILL KNOCK YOU INTO NEXT WEEK.
MESS WITH ME, AND YOU'LL FIND OUT YOUR CALENDAR DOESN'T HAVE A "NEXT WEEK"

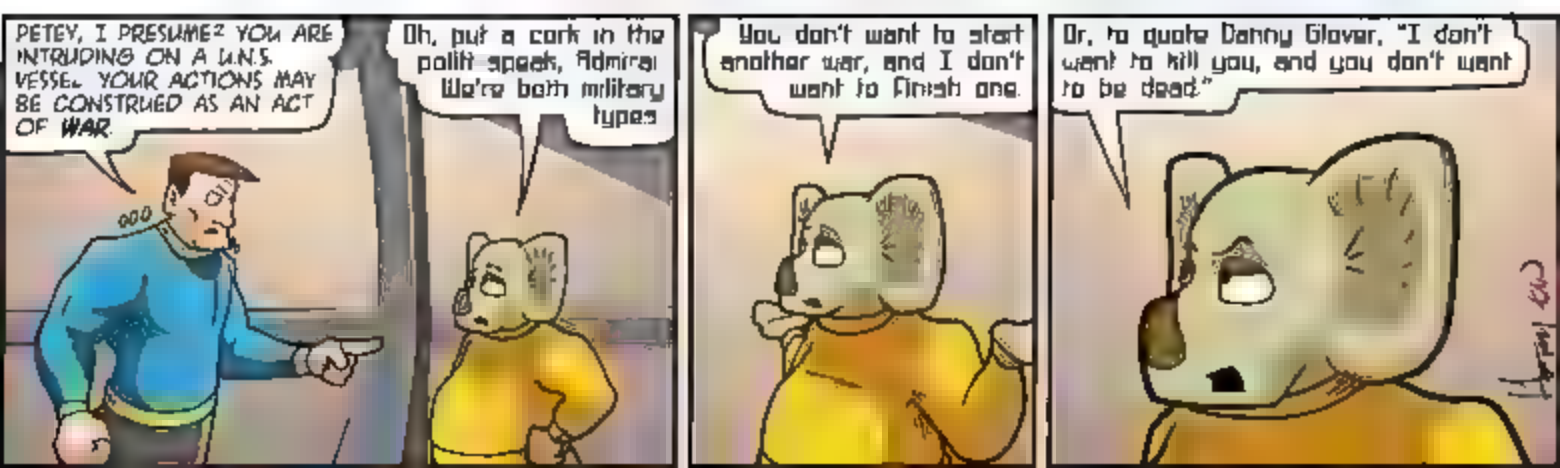
NO MORE POSTURING.
NOW ITS ALL KNUCKLES, KNEES, AND NIGHTSTICKS
AND PISTOLS DON'T FORGET THE PISTOLS

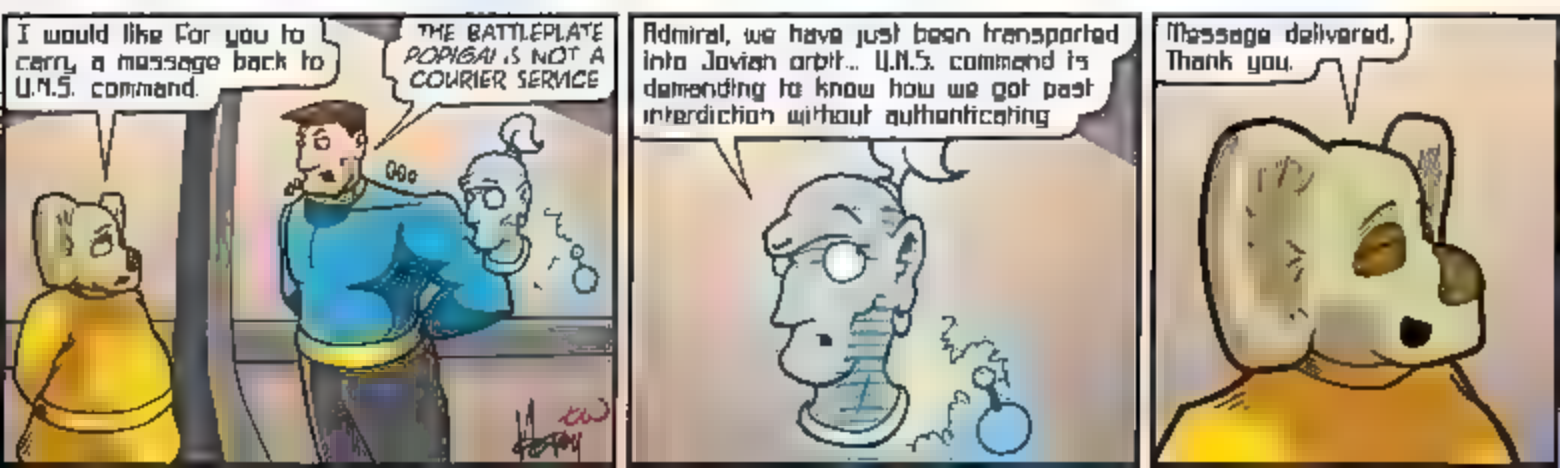

ELF FIRES ONE ROUND EACH INTO HER OPPONENTS FACES
THESE ARE THE ROUNDS SHE SUCCESSFULLY SMUGGLED INTO THE STUDIO.
I'M ALIVE?
STAGE BLANKS.
REAL FISTS

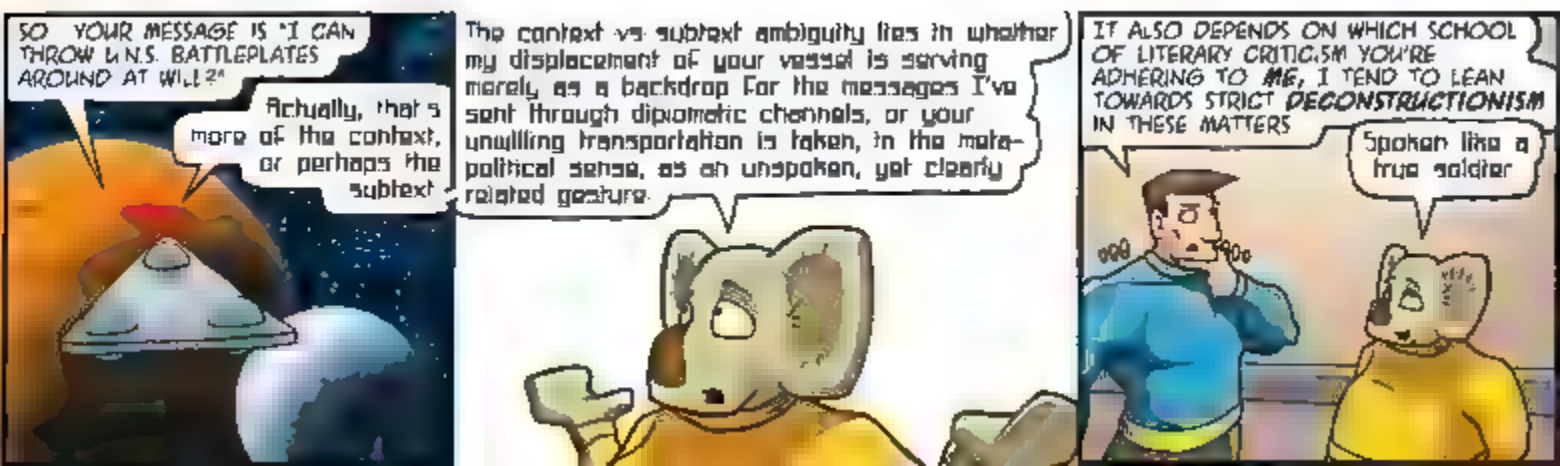
I THINK YOU'LL FIND ME A LITTLE HARDER TO SUCKER-PUNCH
I WASN'T PLANNING ON PUNCHING YOU.
YOUR WEAPON FIRES BLANKS, LIEUTENANT. WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO, THROW IT AT ME?
HELLO, OFFICER. GUESS WHAT MY WEAPON ISN'T LOADED WITH.

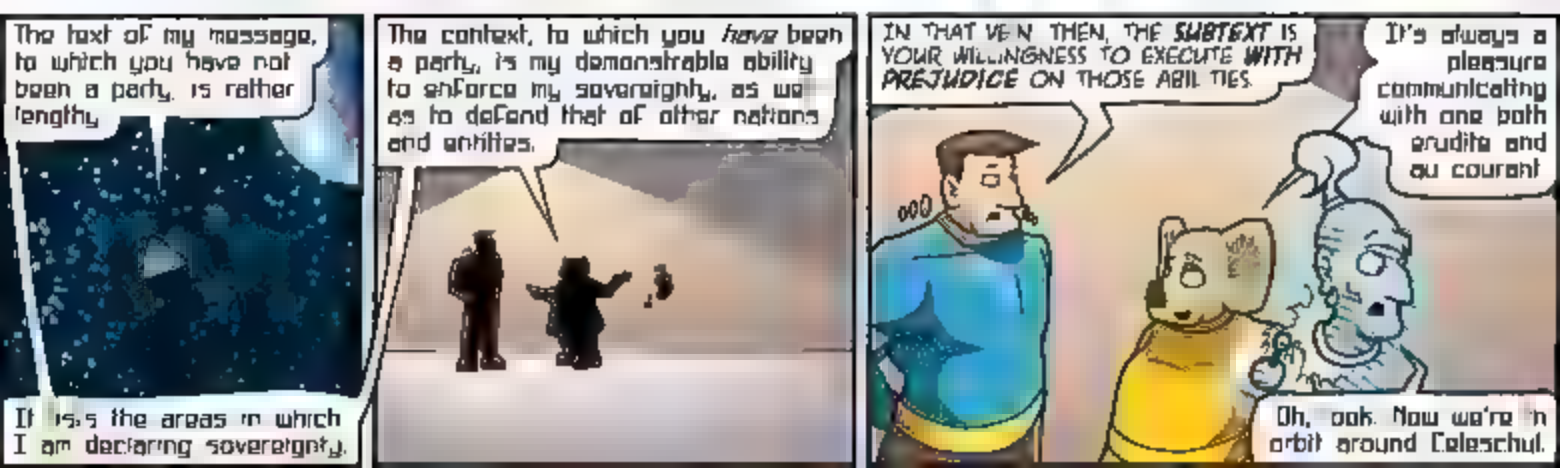

MEANWHILE TOWARDS THE GALACTIC CORE
Buulhandi three has been located and resolved.
Schlock Mercenary
ESTABLISH A BEACHHEAD, POPI. I WANT A TERAPORT CAGE FUNCTIONING BY THE END OF THE HOUR
Our probes are being destroyed with ninety-nine point eight six percent efficiency.
SO WE GET TO KEEP FOURTEEN OUT OF EVERY TEN THOUSAND THAT'S FOURTEEN MORE THAN NONE


Uh-oh. We have been spotted. I am fending off attempted teraports right now.
IS THIS A GATEKEEPER COUNTERATTACK?
Unknown, sir.
Correction: it is not a Gatekeeper counterattack.
An *amazing* example of high-speed A.I. deduction. Popi here deserves a raise, Admiral.


PETEY, I PRESUME? YOU ARE INTRUDING ON A U.N.S. VESSEL. YOUR ACTIONS MAY BE CONSTRUED AS AN ACT OF WAR.
Oh, put a cork in the polit speak, Admiral. We're both military types.
You don't want to start another war, and I don't want to finish one.
Or, to quote Danny Glover, "I don't want to kill you, and you don't want to be dead."


I would like for you to carry a message back to U.N.S. command.
THE BATTLEPLATE POPIGAI IS NOT A COURIER SERVICE
Admiral, we have just been transported into Jovian orbit... U.N.S. command is demanding to know how we got past interdiction without authenticating
Message delivered. Thank you.


SO YOUR MESSAGE IS "I CAN THROW U.N.S. BATTLEPLATES AROUND AT WILL?"
Actually, that's more of the context, or perhaps the subtext.
The context vs. subtext ambiguity lies in whether my displacement of your vessel is serving merely as a backdrop for the messages I've sent through diplomatic channels, or your unwilling transportation is taken, in the meta-political sense, as an unspoken, yet clearly related gesture.
IT ALSO DEPENDS ON WHICH SCHOOL OF LITERARY CRITICISM YOU'RE ADHERING TO. ME, I TEND TO LEAN TOWARDS STRICT DECONSTRUCTIONISM IN THESE MATTERS
Spoken like a true soldier


The text of my message, to which you have not been a party, is rather lengthy.
It lists the areas in which I am declaring sovereignty.
The context, to which you *have* been a party, is my demonstrable ability to enforce my sovereignty, as well as to defend that of other nations and entities.
IN THAT VEIN THEN, THE ***SUBTEXT*** IS YOUR WILLINGNESS TO EXECUTE ***WITH PREJUDICE*** ON THOSE ABILITIES.
It's always a pleasure communicating with one both erudite and au courant.
Oh, look. Now we're in orbit around Coleschul.

THE SUDDEN APPEARANCE OF A BATTLEPLATE IN CELESCHUL'S SKY IS CAUSE FOR CONSTERNATION
EVEN THE LESS IMAGINATIVE INTELLIGENCES TAKE NOTE
TRAFFIC IS DISRUPTED. ORBITS MUST BE ALTERED. DEFENSE SYSTEMS SCREAM IN COMPLAINT
OH, HEY. WHERE DID YOU COME FROM?
I don't want to talk about it

WE NOW RETURN YOU TO STUDIO SIX
STEP ASIDE, ELF IT'S MY TURN
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, GIVE ME YOUR ATTENTION WE ARE GOING TO PLAY A LITTLE GAME
I CALL IT "HOW MANY PEOPLE DO I NEED TO SHOOT BEFORE THE AUDIENCE RUNS FROM THE ROOM?"
CAN I PLAY? THIS SOUNDS LIKE FUN
RIGHT NOW THE COUNTER IS ON "ZERO." IN TEN SECONDS I'LL BE ADVANCING IT TO "ONE."

The on-site R.A.C. detail just called us. They need an armed response team immediately.
Apparently Ebby succeeded in stirring up some industrial-grade panic
SEND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT, AND LET'S CRASH THE PARTY I LOVE A GOOD PANIC
TAG is calling. The battleplate Popigal just 'ported in next to the Touch-And-Go.
DECIDING WHETHER TO PANIC... I DON'T LOVE THAT SO MUCH.

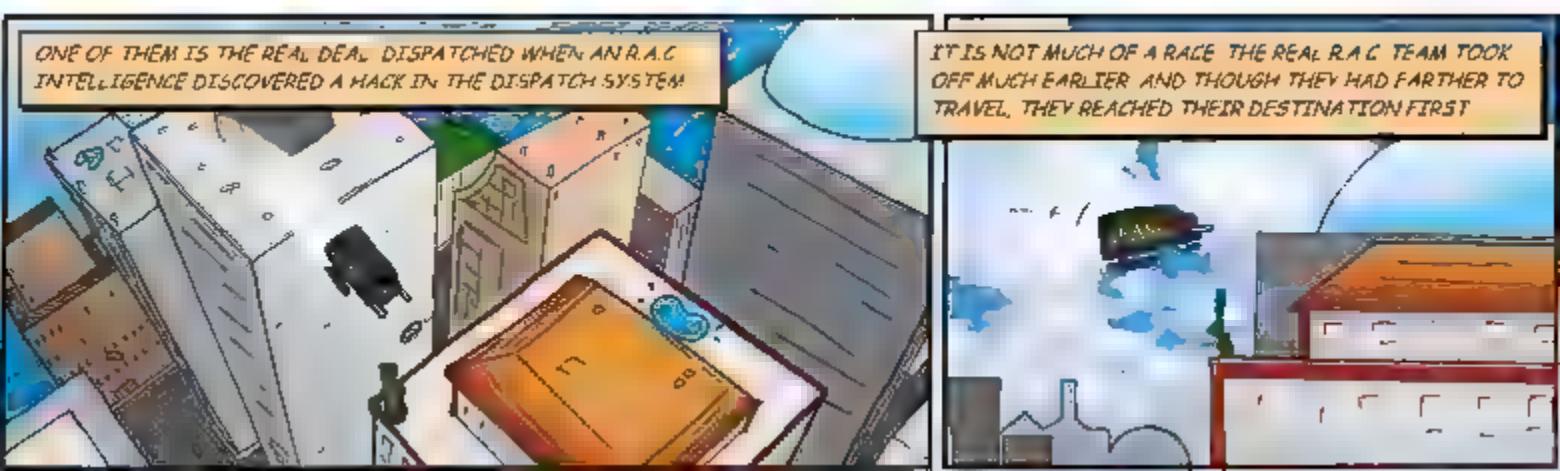
THE CITIZENS OF SAN ASIMOV HAVE RECENTLY OBSERVED FOUR "R.A.C. ARMED RESPONSE" WAGONS TEARING THROUGH TOWN.

R.A.C. armed response

Schlock Mercenary

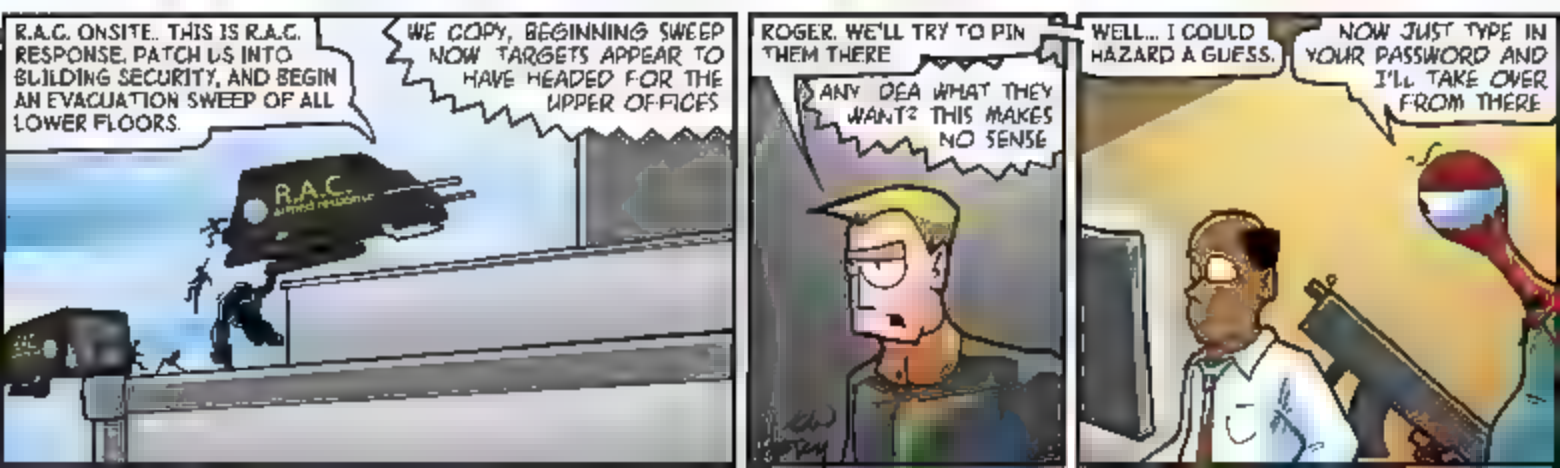
R.A.C.

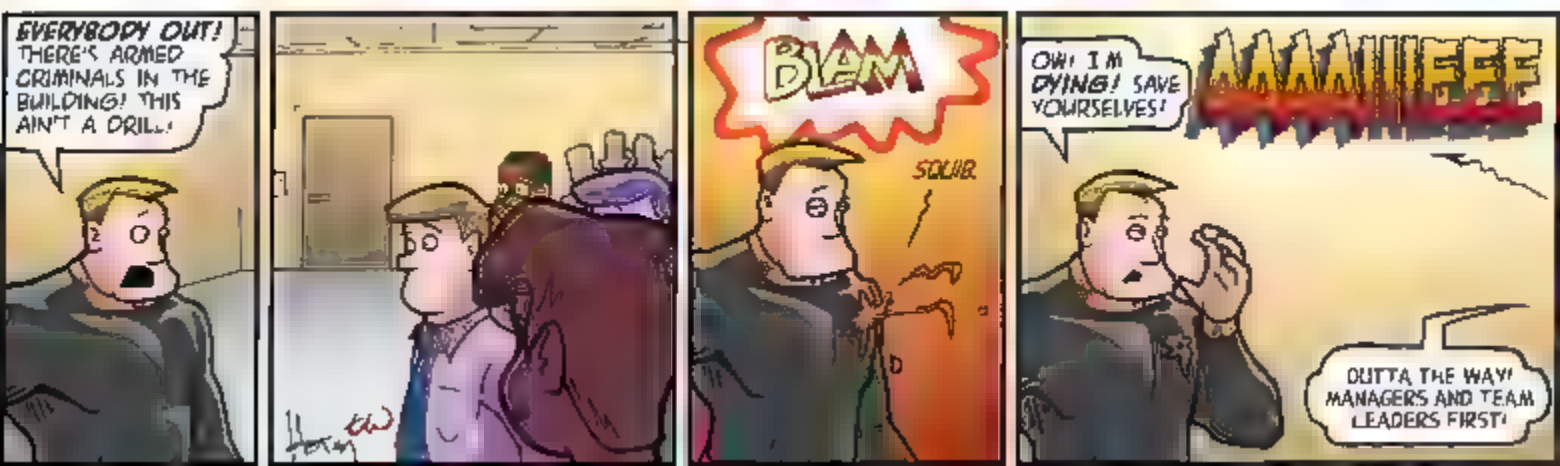
THREE OF THEM ARE FAKES, FULL OF "TOUGHS" UNDER THE COMMAND OF MERCENARY CAPTAIN KAFF TAGON.

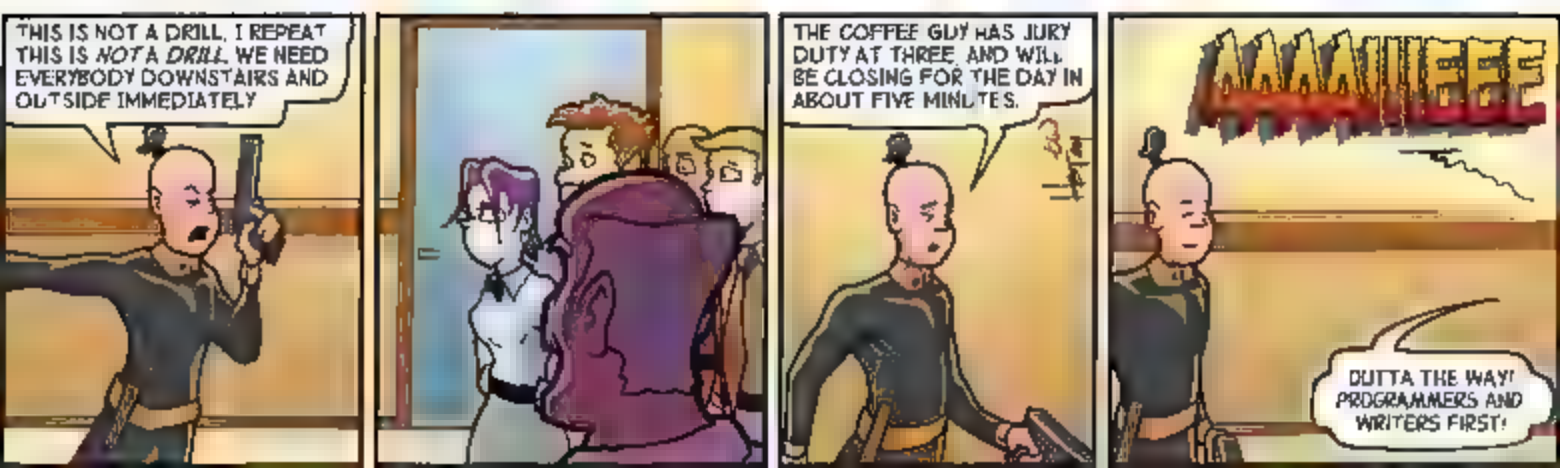

ONE OF THEM IS THE REAL DEAL DISPATCHED WHEN AN R.A.C INTELLIGENCE DISCOVERED A HACK IN THE DISPATCH SYSTEM
IT IS NOT MUCH OF A RACE THE REAL R.A.C TEAM TOOK OFF MUCH EARLIER AND THOUGH THEY HAD FARTHER TO TRAVEL, THEY REACHED THEIR DESTINATION FIRST

THEY MAY BE RENT-A-COPS BUT IN THIS DAY AND AGE THAT DOES NOT MEAN UNARMED DONUT DUNKERS THEY ARE LAW-ENFORCEMENT MERCENARIES WELL EQUIPPED HIGHLY TRAINED, AND CONSUMMATELY PROFESSIONAL.
BUMMER THE SCAN SAYS THE PENTHOUSE IS EMPTY
THEY ARE ALSO IN THE WRONG PLACE

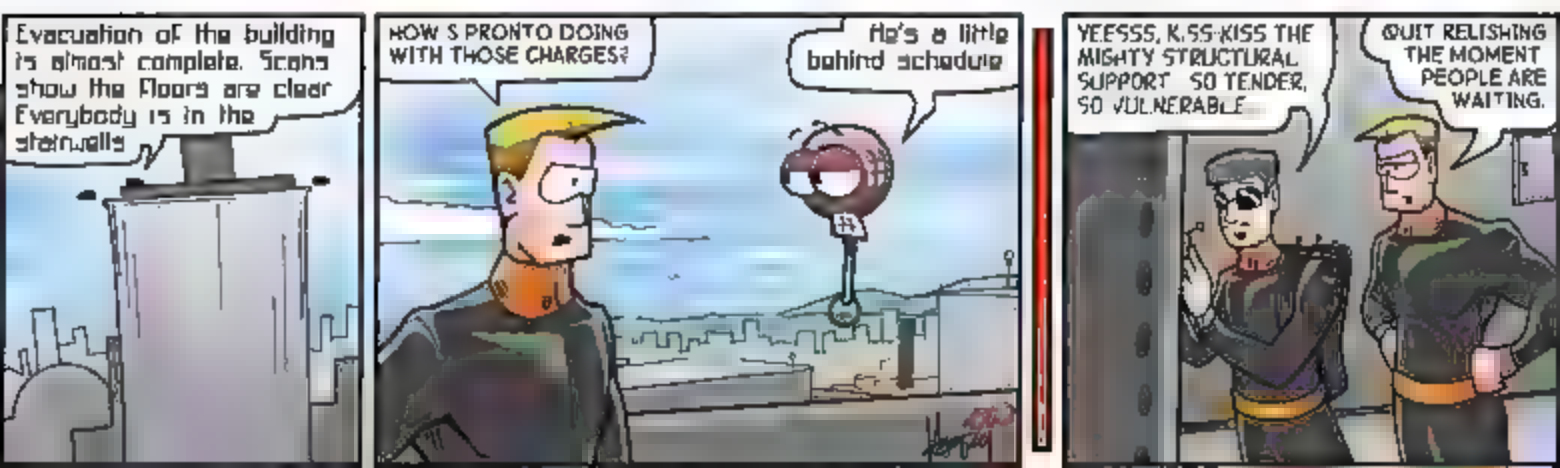
Massey says the R.A.C. team just arrived at the penthouse.
He'll be dropping "evidence" in their laps shortly.
I'M MORE WORRIED ABOUT THAT BATTLEPLATE OVER OUR HEADS
You shouldn't be.
GIVE ME ONE GOOD REASON.
Because there's nothing you can do about it?
OKAAAY NOW GIVE ME ONE GOOD REASON.
Oh, looky! We're here.

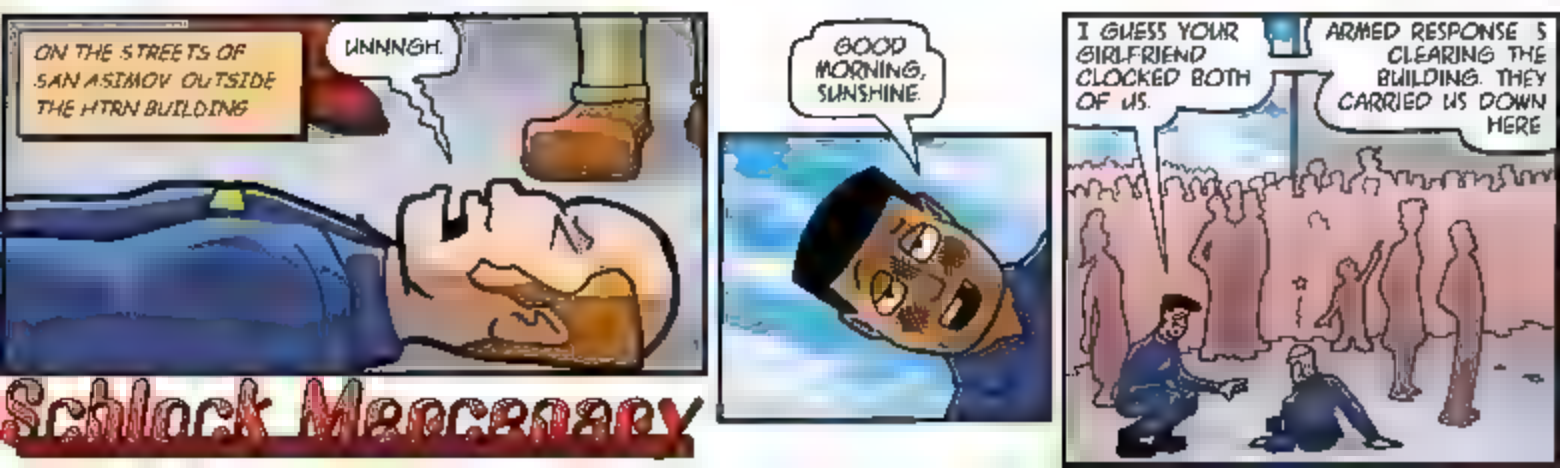

R.A.C. ONSITE.. THIS IS R.A.C. RESPONSE. PATCH US INTO BUILDING SECURITY, AND BEGIN AN EVACUATION SWEEP OF ALL LOWER FLOORS.
WE COPY, BEGINNING SWEEP NOW TARGETS APPEAR TO HAVE HEADED FOR THE UPPER OFFICES
R.A.C.
ROGER. WE'LL TRY TO PIN THEM THERE
ANY IDEA WHAT THEY WANT? THIS MAKES NO SENSE
WELL... I COULD HAZARD A GUESS.
NOW JUST TYPE IN YOUR PASSWORD AND I'LL TAKE OVER FROM THERE

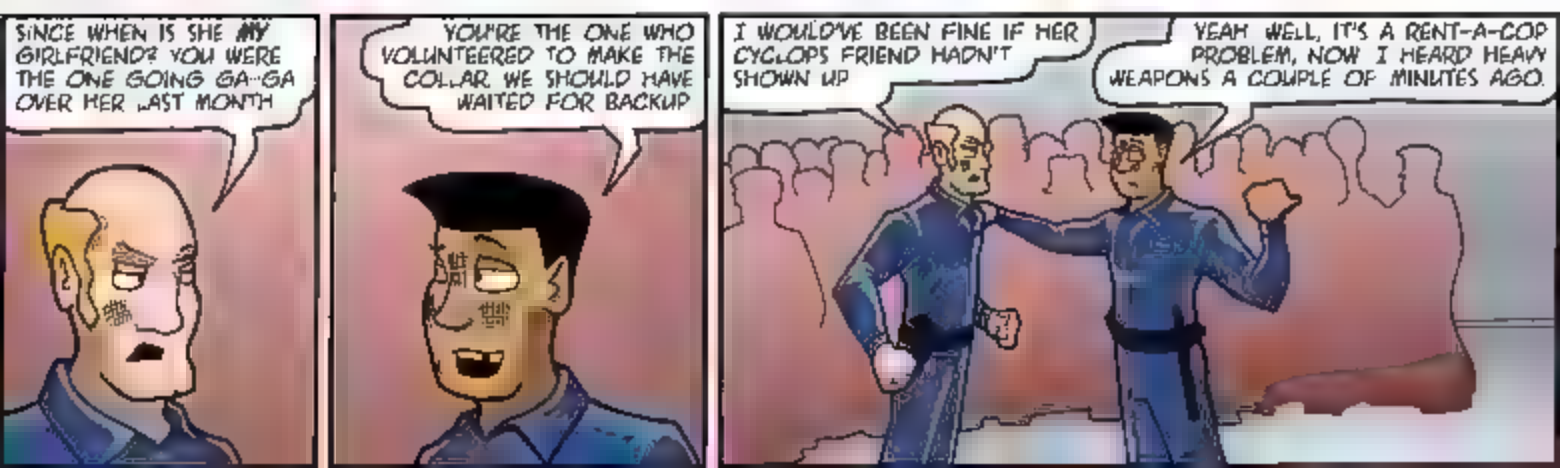

EVERYBODY OUT! THERE'S ARMED CRIMINALS IN THE BUILDING! THIS AIN'T A DRILL!
BLAM
SQUIB
OW! I'M DYING! SAVE YOURSELVES!
AAAAIIEEE
OUTTA THE WAY! MANAGERS AND TEAM LEADERS FIRST!

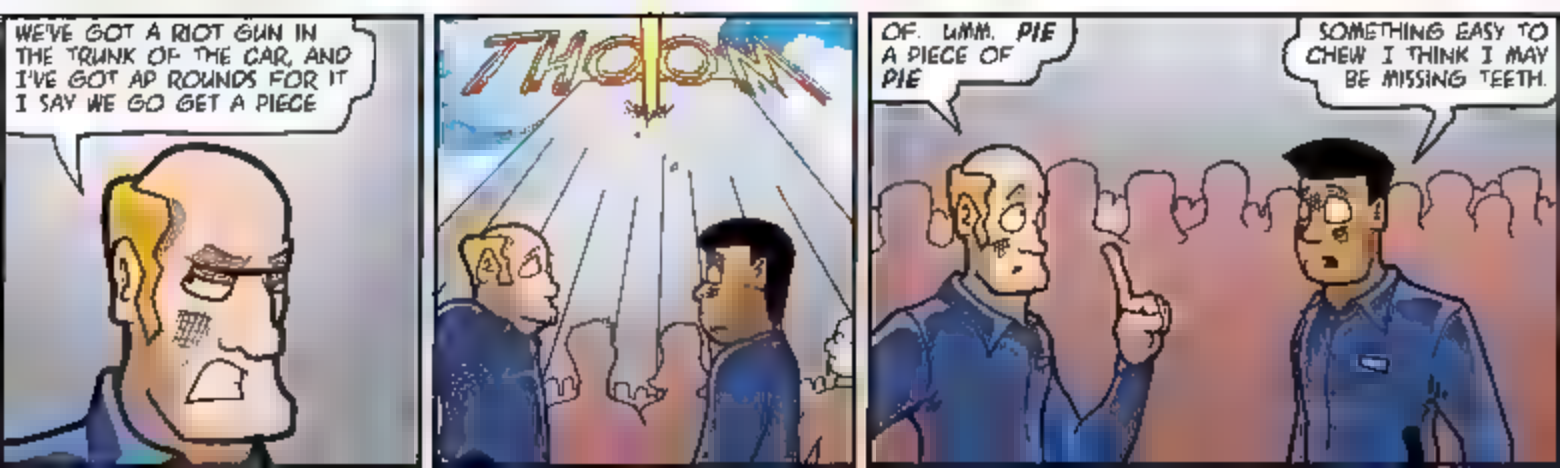

THIS IS NOT A DRILL. I REPEAT THIS IS *NOT* A *DRILL*. WE NEED EVERYBODY DOWNSTAIRS AND OUTSIDE IMMEDIATELY
THE COFFEE GUY HAS JURY DUTY AT THREE, AND WILL BE CLOSING FOR THE DAY IN ABOUT FIVE MINUTES.
AAAAIIEEE
OUTTA THE WAY! PROGRAMMERS AND WRITERS FIRST!

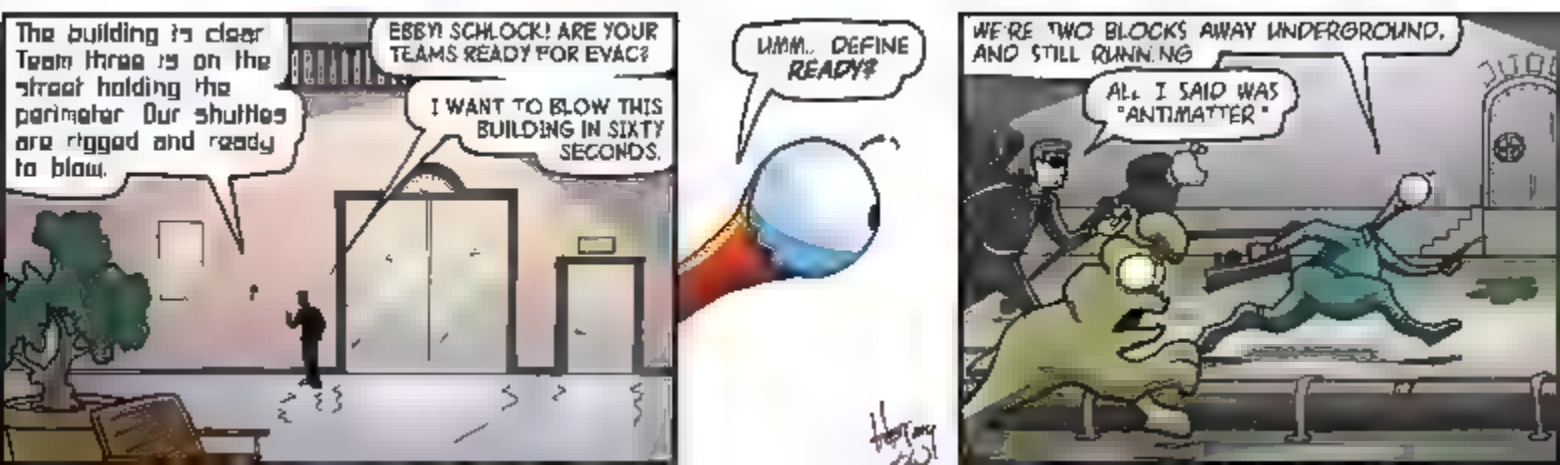
People, we have confirmed reports of a fire-fight in the building. Get downstairs now!
IF THERE'S A FIRE, WHERE'S THE SMOKE?
THOOOM
AAAAAIIIEEE
Hey, look. Smoke!

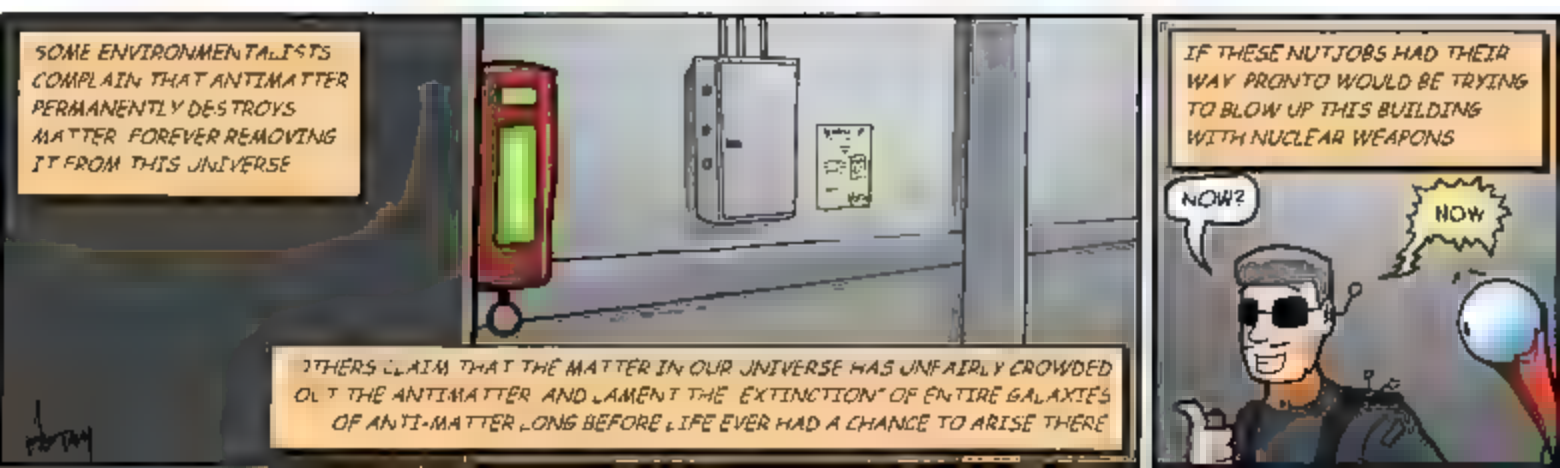

Evacuation of the building is almost complete. Scans show the floors are clear. Everybody is in the stairwells.
HOW'S PRONTO DOING WITH THOSE CHARGES?
He's a little behind schedule.
YEESSS, K-SS-KISS THE MIGHTY STRUCTURAL SUPPORT... SO TENDER, SO VULNERABLE...
QUIT RELISHING THE MOMENT. PEOPLE ARE WAITING.

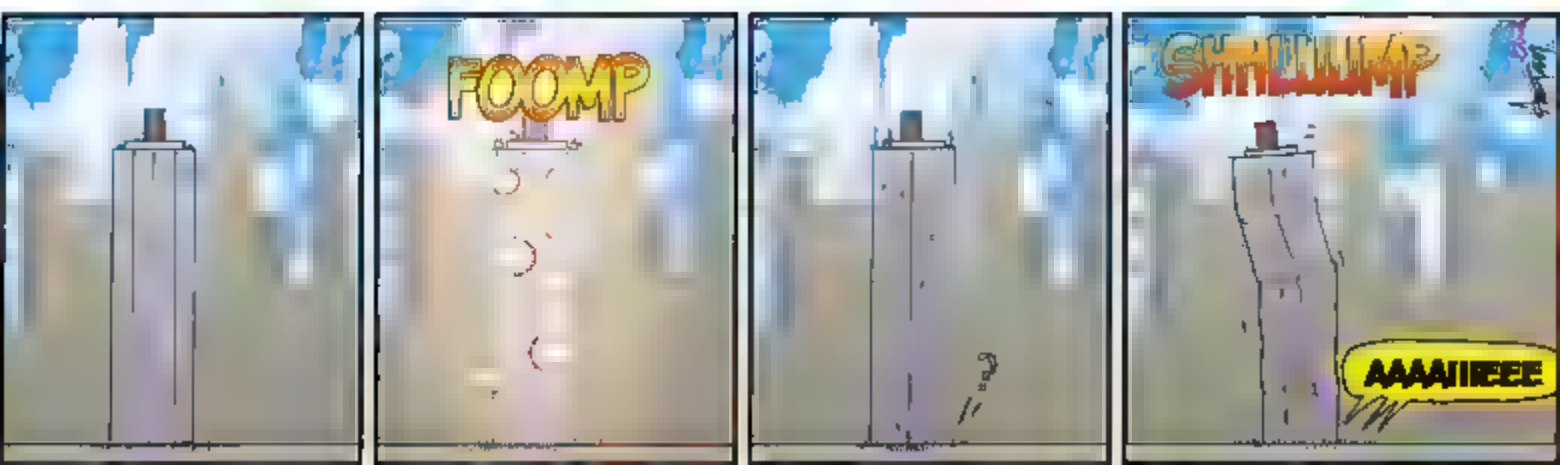

ON THE STREETS OF SAN ASIMOV OUTSIDE THE HTRN BUILDING
UNNNGH.
GOOD MORNING, SUNSHINE.
I GUESS YOUR GIRLFRIEND CLOCKED BOTH OF US.
ARMED RESPONSE S CLEARING THE BUILDING. THEY CARRIED US DOWN HERE
Schlock Mercenary


SINCE WHEN IS SHE MY GIRLFRIEND? YOU WERE THE ONE GOING GA-GA OVER HER LAST MONTH
YOU'RE THE ONE WHO VOLUNTEERED TO MAKE THE COLLAR. WE SHOULD HAVE WAITED FOR BACKUP
I WOULD'VE BEEN FINE IF HER CYCLOPS FRIEND HADN'T SHOWN UP
YEAH WELL, IT'S A RENT-A-COP PROBLEM, NOW I HEARD HEAVY WEAPONS A COUPLE OF MINUTES AGO.

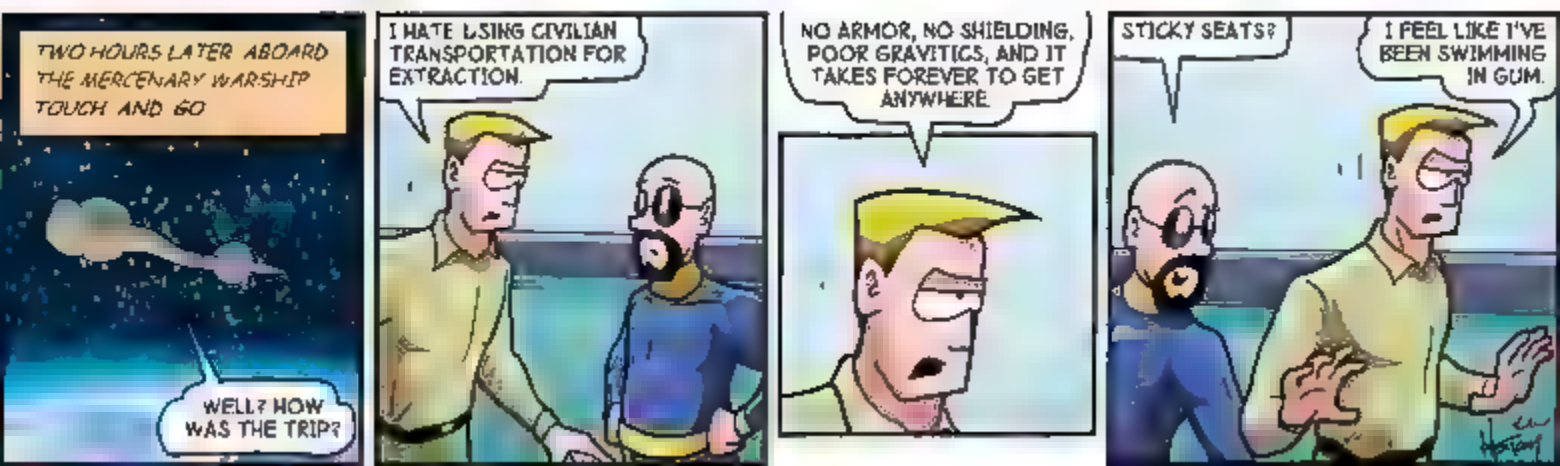

WE'VE GOT A RIOT GUN IN THE TRUNK OF THE CAR, AND I'VE GOT AP ROUNDS FOR IT I SAY WE GO GET A PIECE
THOOM
OF. UMM. PIE A PIECE OF PIE
SOMETHING EASY TO CHEW I THINK I MAY BE MISSING TEETH.

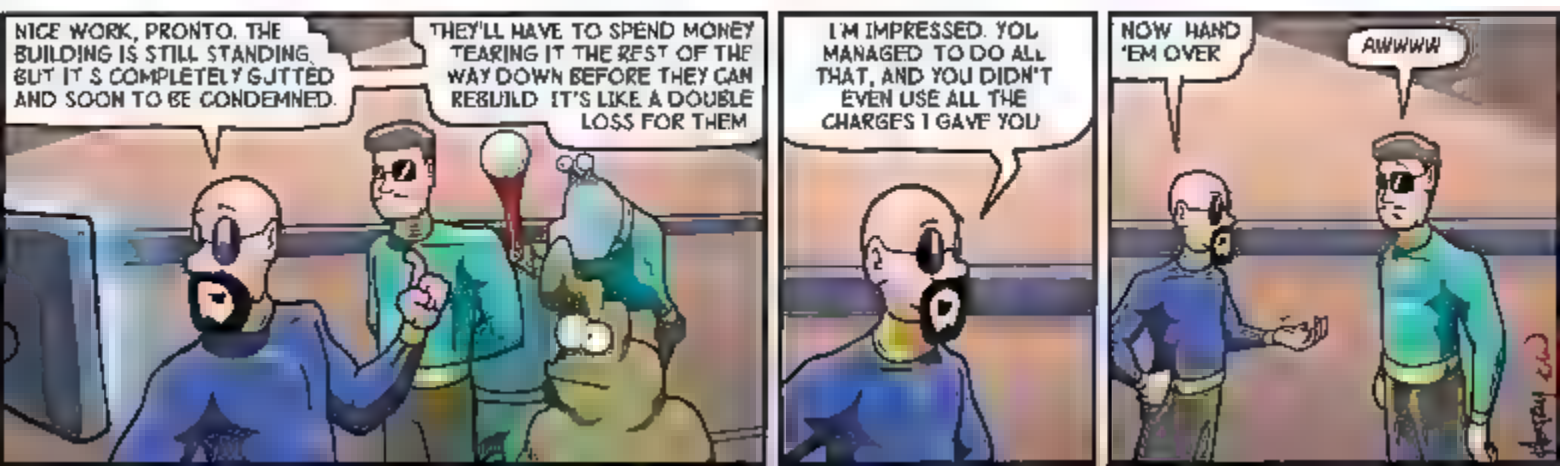

The building is clear. Team three is on the street holding the perimeter. Our shuttles are rigged and ready to blow.
EBBY! SCHLOCK! ARE YOUR TEAMS READY FOR EVAC?
I WANT TO BLOW THIS BUILDING IN SIXTY SECONDS.
UMM... DEFINE READY?
WE'RE TWO BLOCKS AWAY UNDERGROUND, AND STILL RUNNING
ALL I SAID WAS "ANTIMATTER."

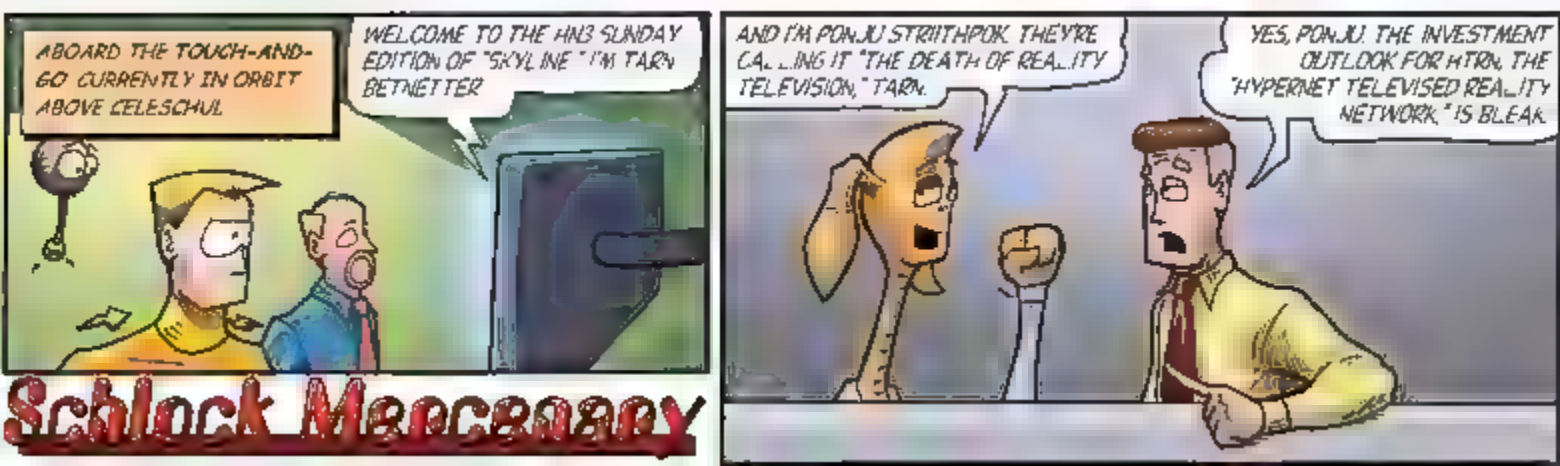

SOME ENVIRONMENTALISTS COMPLAIN THAT ANTIMATTER PERMANENTLY DESTROYS MATTER FOREVER REMOVING IT FROM THIS UNIVERSE
OTHERS CLAIM THAT THE MATTER IN OUR UNIVERSE HAS UNFAIRLY CROWDED OUT THE ANTIMATTER AND LAMENT THE "EXTINCTION" OF ENTIRE GALAXIES OF ANTI-MATTER LONG BEFORE LIFE EVER HAD A CHANCE TO ARISE THERE
IF THESE NUTJOBS HAD THEIR WAY PRONTO WOULD BE TRYING TO BLOW UP THIS BUILDING WITH NUCLEAR WEAPONS
NOW?
NOW

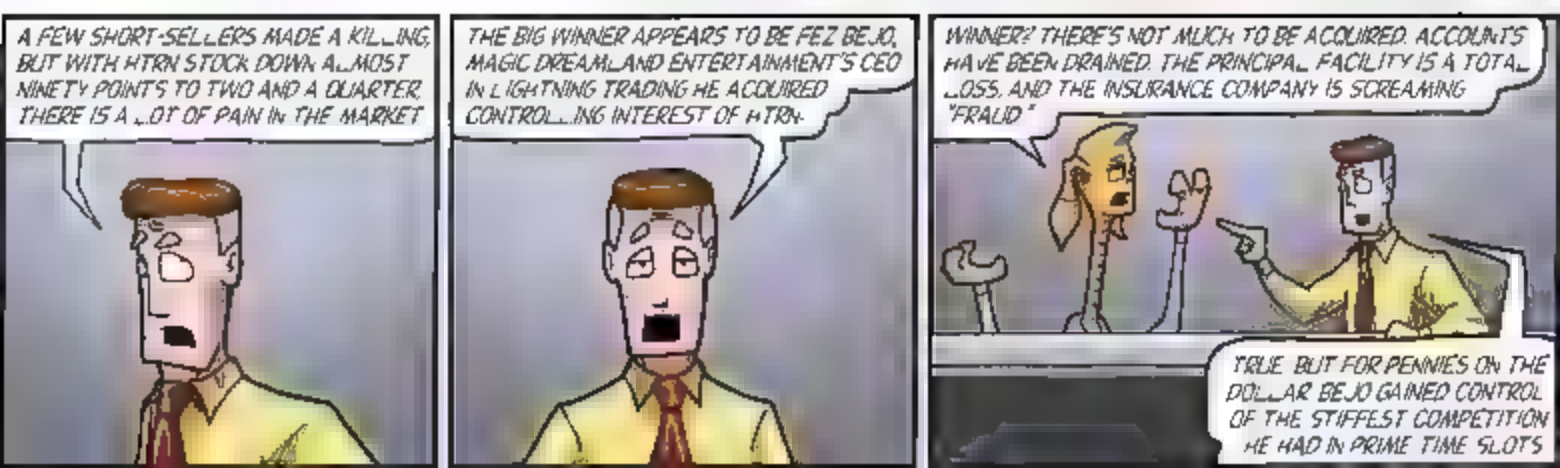

FOOMP
SHLUUUMP
AAAAIIIEEE

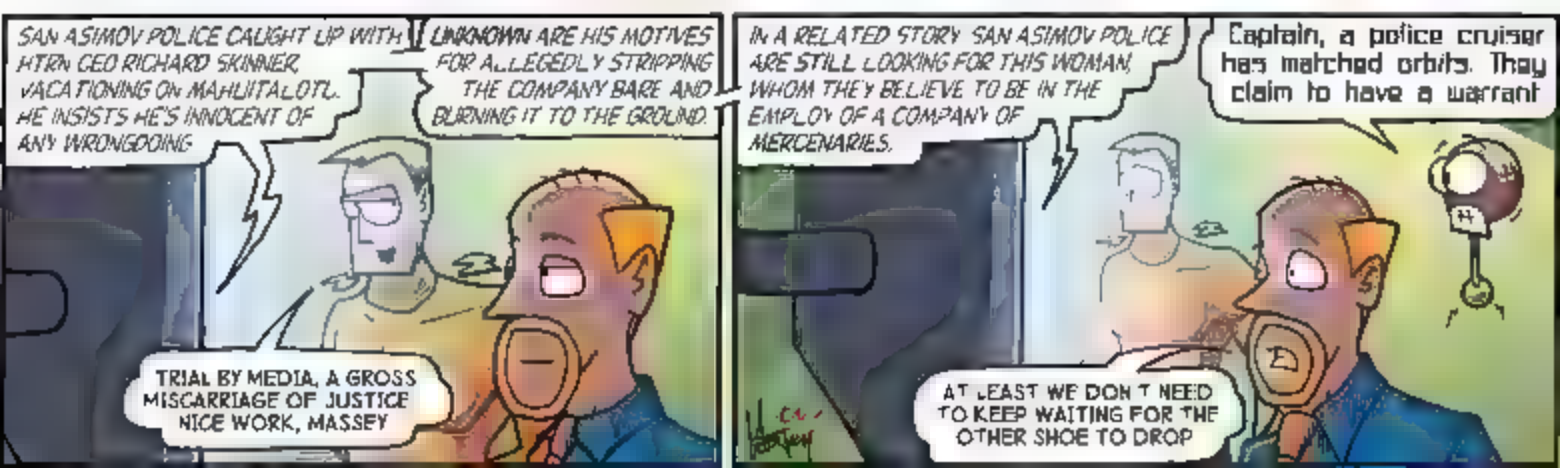
THE EXPLOSION SETS OFF A PANIC AND THE CROWD AT THE BASE OF THE HTRN BUILDING SCATTERS
EXPERTS OFFER LOTS OF SURVIVAL TRICKS FOR PEOPLE CAUGHT IN PANICKED CROWDS
ONE THING THE EXPERTS SELDOM MENTION:
HOW DO I LOOK?
NICE VERY CIVILIAN.
IT IS A GREAT TIME TO CHANGE CLOTHING


TWO HOURS LATER ABOARD THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH AND GO
WELL? HOW WAS THE TRIP?
I HATE USING CIVILIAN TRANSPORTATION FOR EXTRACTION.
NO ARMOR, NO SHIELDING, POOR GRAVITICS, AND IT TAKES FOREVER TO GET ANYWHERE.
STICKY SEATS?
I FEEL LIKE I'VE BEEN SWIMMING IN GUM.

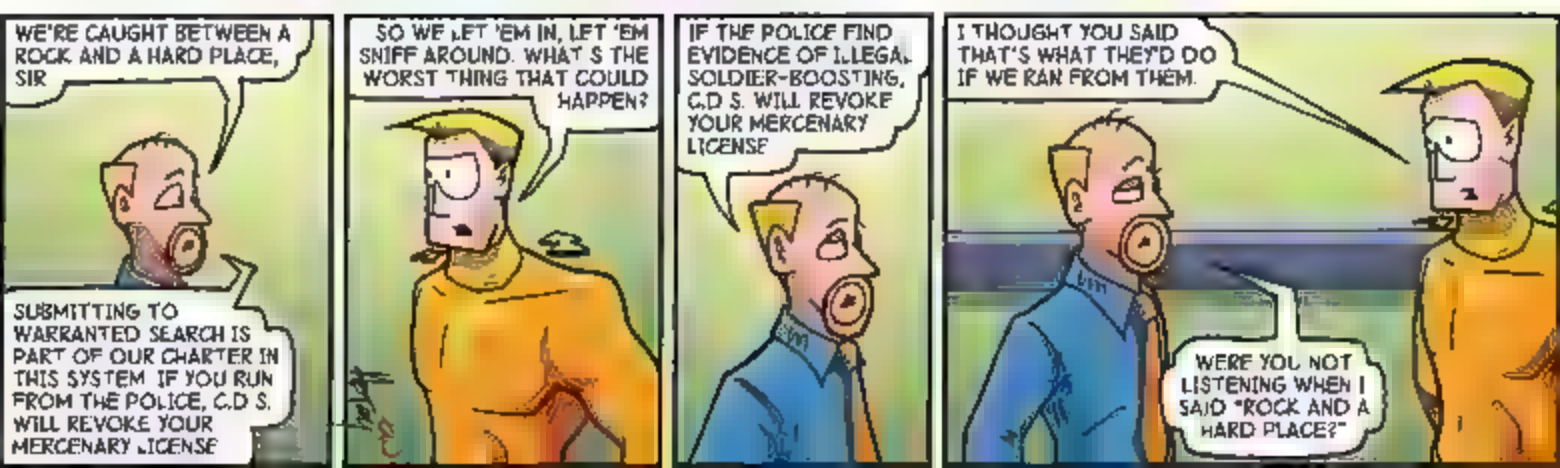

NICE WORK, PRONTO. THE BUILDING IS STILL STANDING, BUT IT S COMPLETELY GUTTED AND SOON TO BE CONDEMNED.
THEY'LL HAVE TO SPEND MONEY TEARING IT THE REST OF THE WAY DOWN BEFORE THEY CAN REBUILD IT'S LIKE A DOUBLE LOSS FOR THEM
I'M IMPRESSED. YOU MANAGED TO DO ALL THAT, AND YOU DIDN'T EVEN USE ALL THE CHARGES I GAVE YOU
NOW HAND 'EM OVER
AWWWW


ABOARD THE TOUCH-AND-GO CURRENTLY IN ORBIT ABOVE CELESCHUL
WELCOME TO THE HN3 SUNDAY EDITION OF "SKYLINE." I'M TARN BETNETTER
AND I'M PONJU STRITHPOK. THEY'RE CALLING IT "THE DEATH OF REALITY TELEVISION," TARN.
YES, PONJU. THE INVESTMENT OUTLOOK FOR HTRN, THE "HYPERNET TELEVISED REALITY NETWORK," IS BLEAK.
Schlock Mercenary

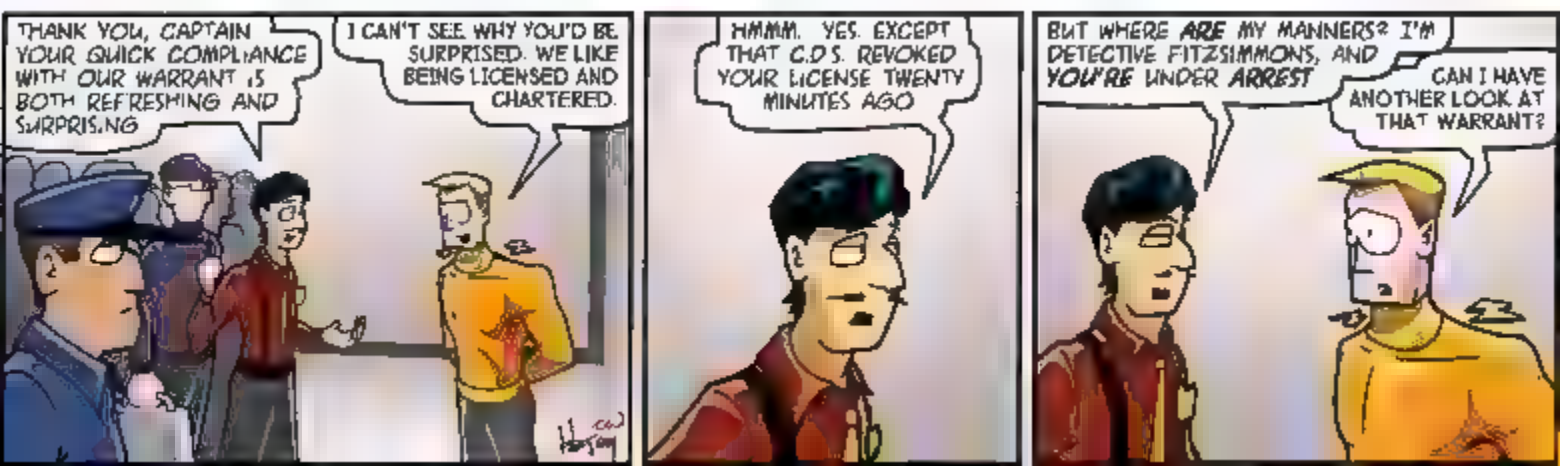

A FEW SHORT-SELLERS MADE A KILLING, BUT WITH HTRN STOCK DOWN ALMOST NINETY POINTS TO TWO AND A QUARTER THERE IS A LOT OF PAIN IN THE MARKET
THE BIG WINNER APPEARS TO BE FEZ BEJO, MAGIC DREAMLAND ENTERTAINMENT'S CEO IN LIGHTNING TRADING HE ACQUIRED CONTROLLING INTEREST OF HTRN.
WINNER? THERE'S NOT MUCH TO BE ACQUIRED. ACCOUNTS HAVE BEEN DRAINED. THE PRINCIPAL FACILITY IS A TOTAL LOSS, AND THE INSURANCE COMPANY IS SCREAMING "FRAUD"
TRUE BUT FOR PENNIES ON THE DOLLAR BEJO GAINED CONTROL OF THE STIFFEST COMPETITION HE HAD IN PRIME TIME SLOTS

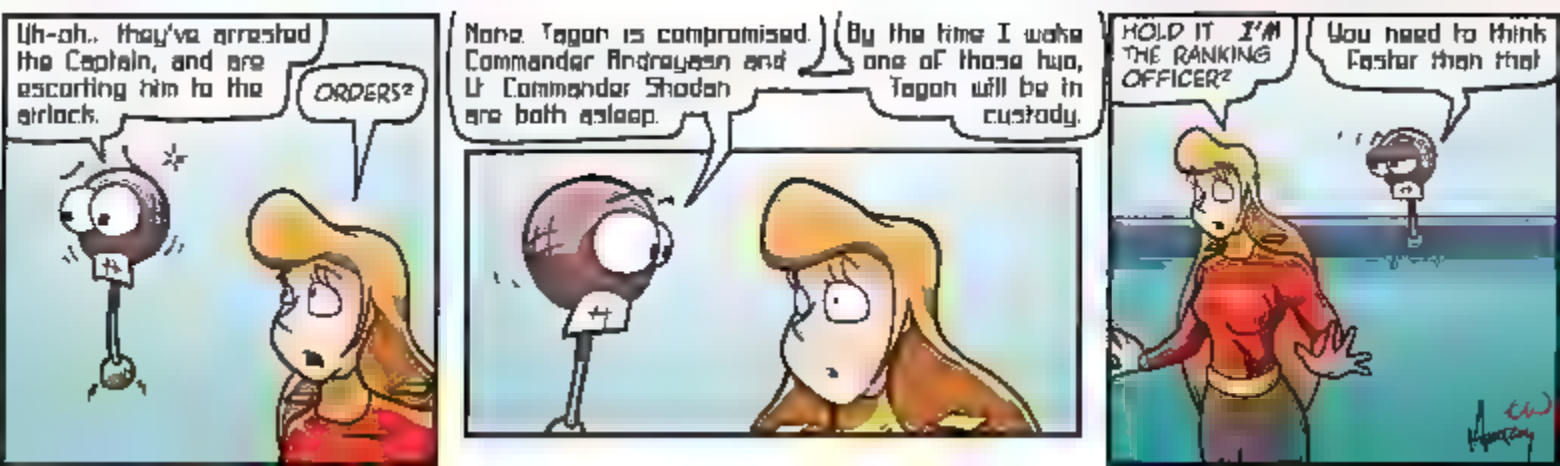

SAN ASIMOV POLICE CAUGHT UP WITH HTRN CEO RICHARD SKINNER, VACATIONING ON MAHUITALOTL. HE INSISTS HE'S INNOCENT OF ANY WRONGDOING.
UNKNOWN ARE HIS MOTIVES FOR ALLEGEDLY STRIPPING THE COMPANY BARE AND BURNING IT TO THE GROUND.
TRIAL BY MEDIA, A GROSS MISCARRIAGE OF JUSTICE NICE WORK, MASSEY
IN A RELATED STORY SAN ASIMOV POLICE ARE STILL LOOKING FOR THIS WOMAN, WHOM THEY BELIEVE TO BE IN THE EMPLOY OF A COMPANY OF MERCENARIES.
Captain, a police cruiser has matched orbits. They claim to have a warrant
AT LEAST WE DON'T NEED TO KEEP WAITING FOR THE OTHER SHOE TO DROP

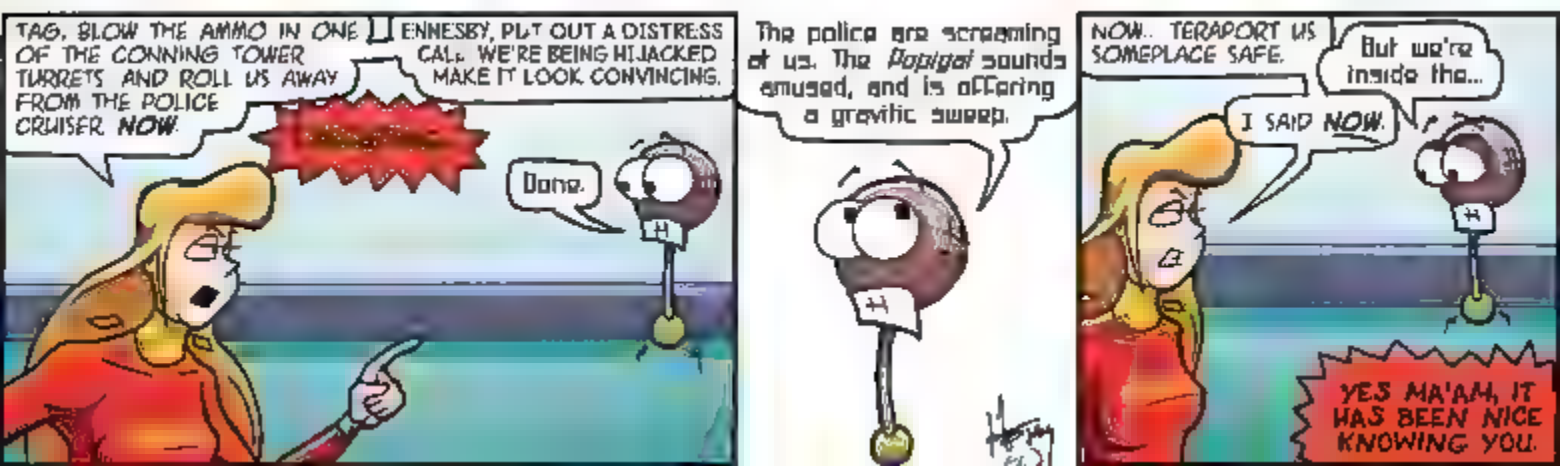
OKAY, THEY DON'T POSE A PHYSICAL THREAT WE ARE A LOT BETTER ARMED THAN THIS POLICE CRUISER IS
So... might makes right?
WELL.. I DON'T THINK WE WANT TO FLEX THOSE MUSCLES YET
Is the battleplate right next door coloring your judgement?
MAYBE

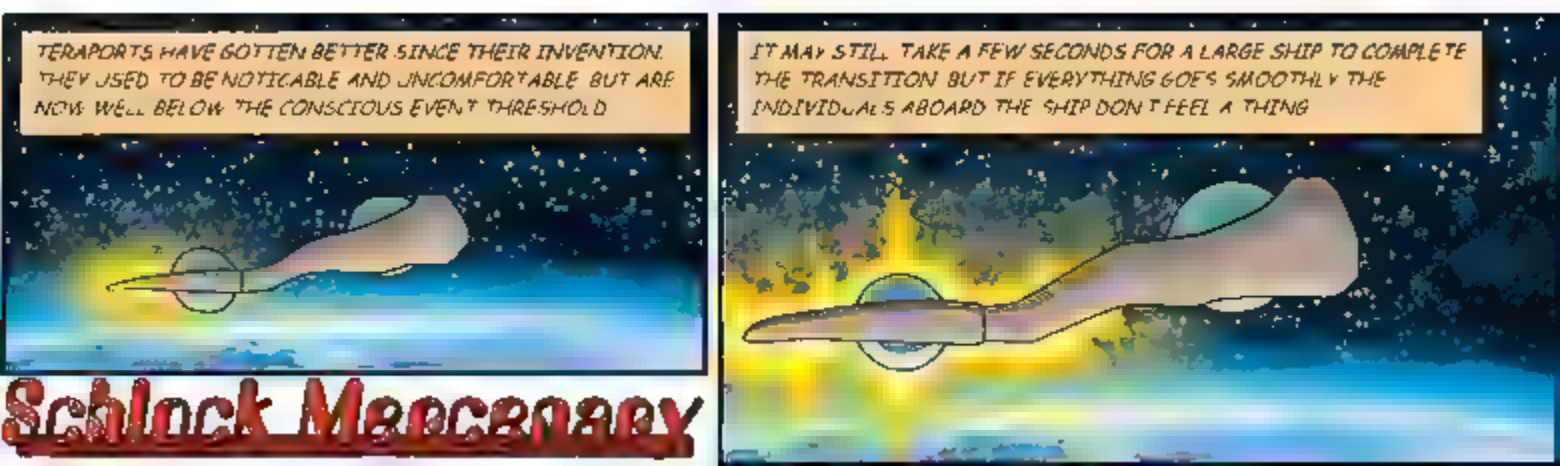

WE'RE CAUGHT BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE, SIR
SUBMITTING TO WARRANTED SEARCH IS PART OF OUR CHARTER IN THIS SYSTEM. IF YOU RUN FROM THE POLICE, C.D.S. WILL REVOKE YOUR MERCENARY LICENSE
SO WE LET 'EM IN, LET 'EM SNIFF AROUND. WHAT'S THE WORST THING THAT COULD HAPPEN?
IF THE POLICE FIND EVIDENCE OF ILLEGAL SOLDIER-BOOSTING, C.D.S. WILL REVOKE YOUR MERCENARY LICENSE
I THOUGHT YOU SAID THAT'S WHAT THEY'D DO IF WE RAN FROM THEM.
WERE YOU NOT LISTENING WHEN I SAID "ROCK AND A HARD PLACE?"

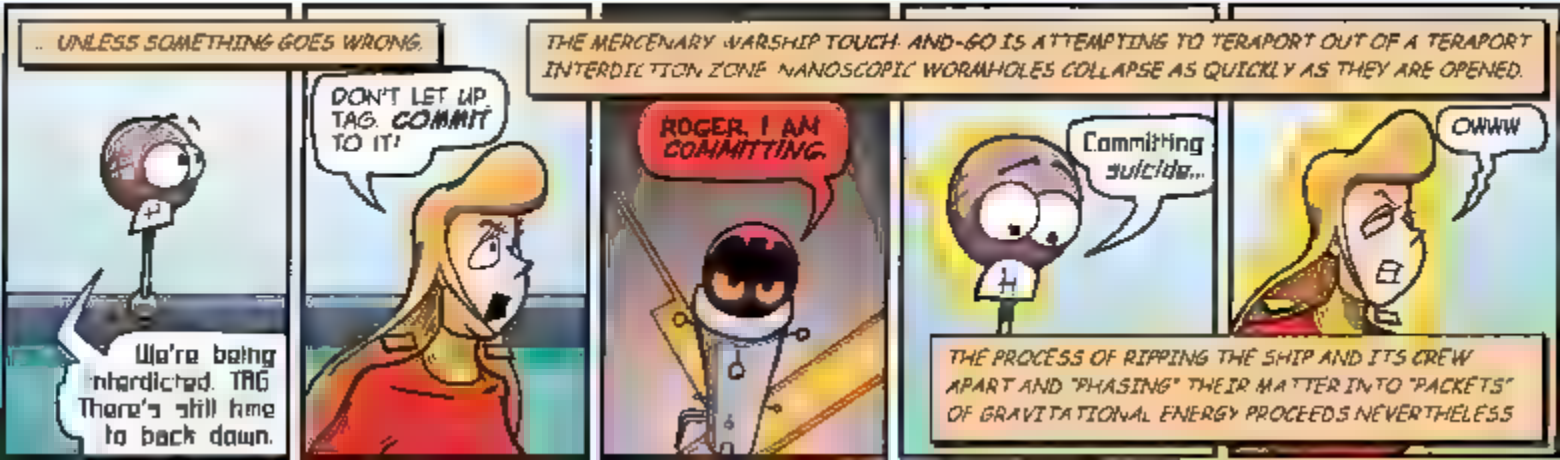
LIEUTENANT, THE POLICE ARE HERE LOOKING FOR YOU. IT'S TIME FOR A GAME OF HIDE-AND-SEEK.
ENNESBY, STAY WITH ELF AND INTERFACE WITH TAG. IT'S A BIG SHIP. YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO MOVE HER AROUND TO KEEP HER HIDDEN.
TAG, YOUR JOB IS TO KEEP ENNESBY APPRISED OF THE POSITIONS OF OUR GUESTS AT ALL TIMES. WE CAN'T LET THEM CATCH ELF.
NAME IS TAG, AND IT SHALL MY JOB TO TURN A HIDE-AND-SEEK INTO GAME OF TAG. HA HA!
SAVE THAT LAUGHTER FOR WHEN WE NEED TO FRIGHTEN SMALL CHILDREN.

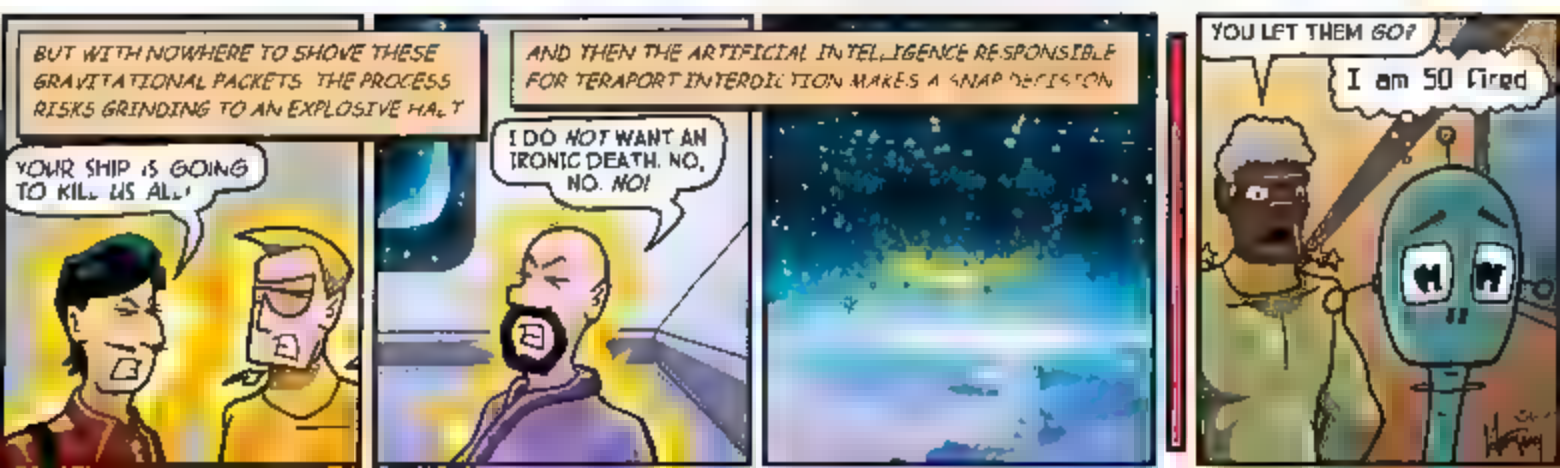

THANK YOU, CAPTAIN. YOUR QUICK COMPLIANCE WITH OUR WARRANT IS BOTH REFRESHING AND SURPRISING.
I CAN'T SEE WHY YOU'D BE SURPRISED. WE LIKE BEING LICENSED AND CHARTERED.
HMMM. YES. EXCEPT THAT C.D.S. REVOKED YOUR LICENSE TWENTY MINUTES AGO.
BUT WHERE ARE MY MANNERS? I'M DETECTIVE FITZSIMMONS, AND YOU'RE UNDER ARREST.
CAN I HAVE ANOTHER LOOK AT THAT WARRANT?


Uh-oh.. they've arrested the Captain, and are escorting him to the airlock.
ORDERS?
None. Tagon is compromised. Commander Andreyasn and Lt Commander Shodan are both asleep.
By the time I wake one of those two, Tagon will be in custody.
HOLD IT I'M THE RANKING OFFICER?
You need to think faster than that


TAG, BLOW THE AMMO IN ONE OF THE CONNING TOWER TURRETS AND ROLL US AWAY FROM THE POLICE CRUISER NOW.
ENNESBY, PUT OUT A DISTRESS CALL. WE'RE BEING HIJACKED. MAKE IT LOOK CONVINCING.
Done.
The police are screaming at us. The Popigal sounds amused, and is offering a gravitic sweep.
NOW... TERAPORT US SOMEPLACE SAFE.
But we're inside the...
I SAID NOW.
YES MA'AM, IT HAS BEEN NICE KNOWING YOU.


TERAPORTS HAVE GOTTEN BETTER SINCE THEIR INVENTION. THEY USED TO BE NOTICABLE AND UNCOMFORTABLE BUT ARE NOW WELL BELOW THE CONSCIOUS EVENT THRESHOLD
IT MAY STILL TAKE A FEW SECONDS FOR A LARGE SHIP TO COMPLETE THE TRANSITION BUT IF EVERYTHING GOES SMOOTHLY THE INDIVIDUALS ABOARD THE SHIP DON'T FEEL A THING
Schlock Mercenary

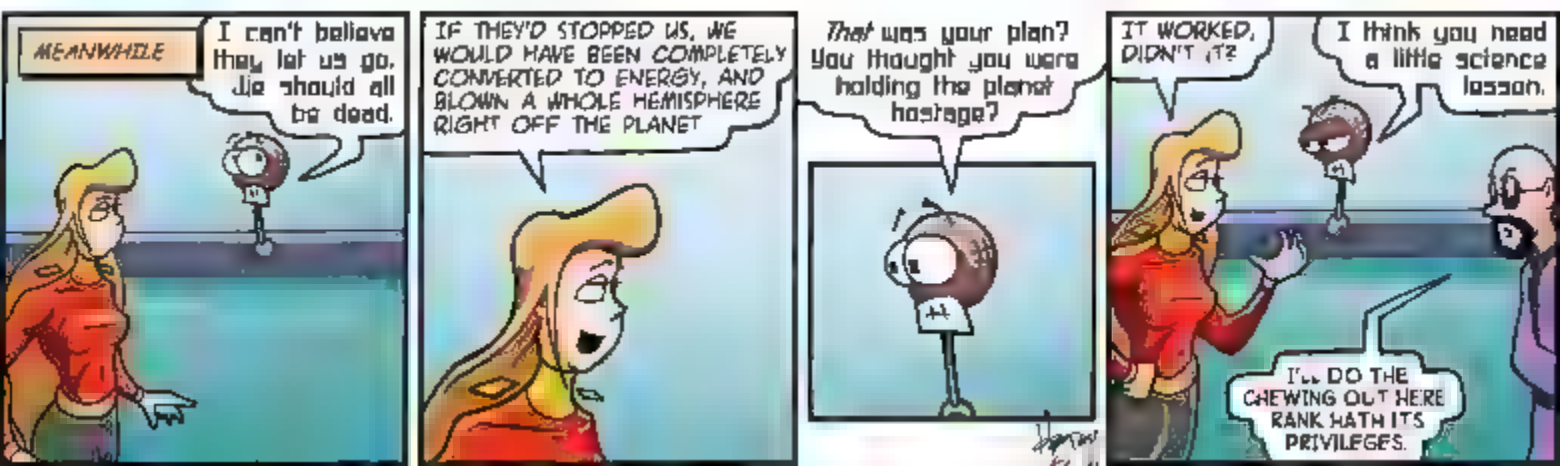

... UNLESS SOMETHING GOES WRONG.
We're being interdicted. TAG There's still time to back down.
DON'T LET UP, TAG. COMMIT TO IT!
THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH-AND-GO IS ATTEMPTING TO TERAPORT OUT OF A TERAPORT INTERDICTION ZONE. NANOSCOPIC WORMHOLES COLLAPSE AS QUICKLY AS THEY ARE OPENED.
ROGER. I AM COMMITTING.
Committing suicide...
OWWW
THE PROCESS OF RIPPING THE SHIP AND ITS CREW APART AND "PHASING" THEIR MATTER INTO "PACKETS" OF GRAVITATIONAL ENERGY PROCEEDS NEVERTHELESS

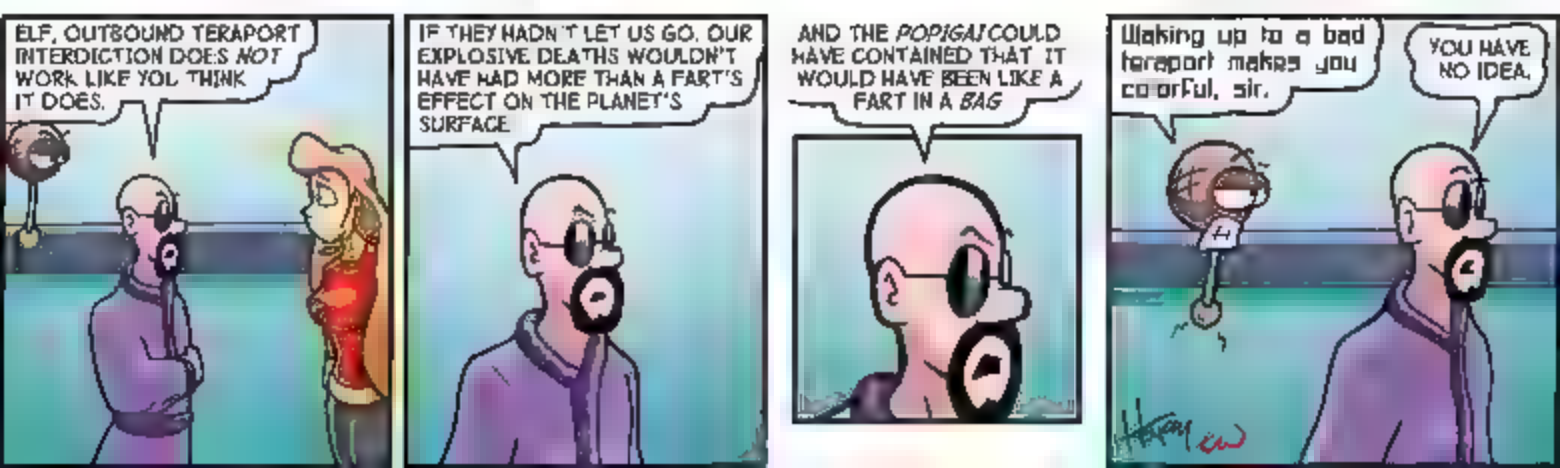

BUT WITH NOWHERE TO SHOVE THESE GRAVITATIONAL PACKETS THE PROCESS RISKS GRINDING TO AN EXPLOSIVE HALT
YOUR SHIP IS GOING TO KILL US ALL!
AND THEN THE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE RESPONSIBLE FOR TERAPORT INTERDICTION MAKES A SNAP DECISION
I DO NOT WANT AN IRONIC DEATH. NO, NO. NO!
YOU LET THEM GO?
I am SO fired

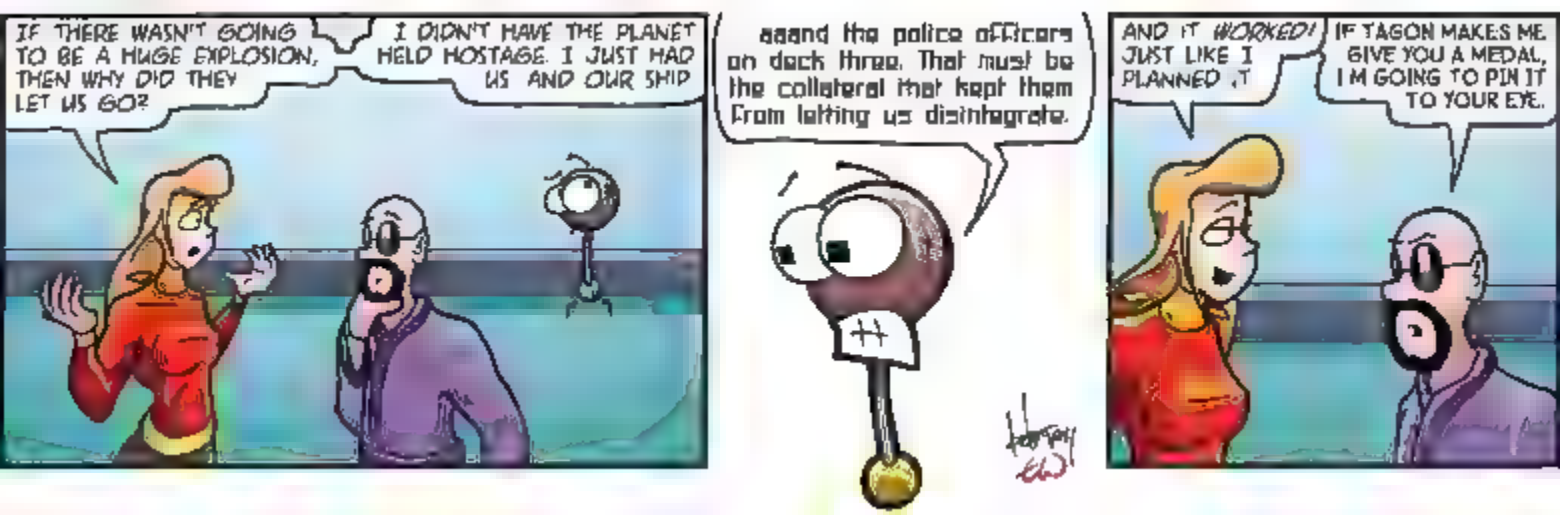
WE'RE ALIVE?
TAG, I NEED BOARDERS NEUTRALIZED IN BAY THREE
WE'RE DEAD

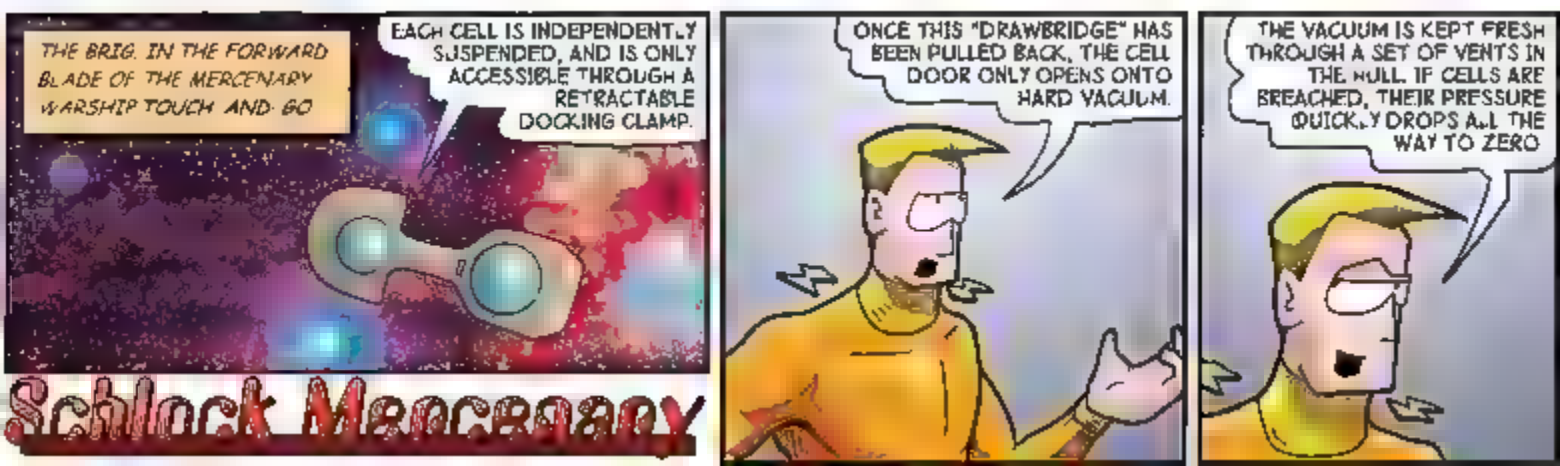
WE'RE NOT GOING TO KILL YOU.
YOU SAID "NEUTRALIZED."
THE SHIP A.I. IS GOING TO USE GRAVITICS TO ENSURE YOU DON'T TRY TO TAKE ME HOSTAGE.
ANY MINUTE NOW

CAPTAIN, THERE HAS BEEN MINOR DAMAGE TO SOME OF THE SHIPBOARD GRAVITICS.
SO YOU'RE SAYING I NEED TO REPEL THESE BOARDERS ALL BY MYSELF?
SUCKS TO BE YOU, CAPTAIN. YOU'RE STILL UNDER ARREST
IN HAPPIER NEWS, I DO HAVE AN ARMOR SQUADRON AT MY DISPOSAL.
I'M SORRY, DETECTIVE. I MISSED THAT YOU WERE SAYING.. ?

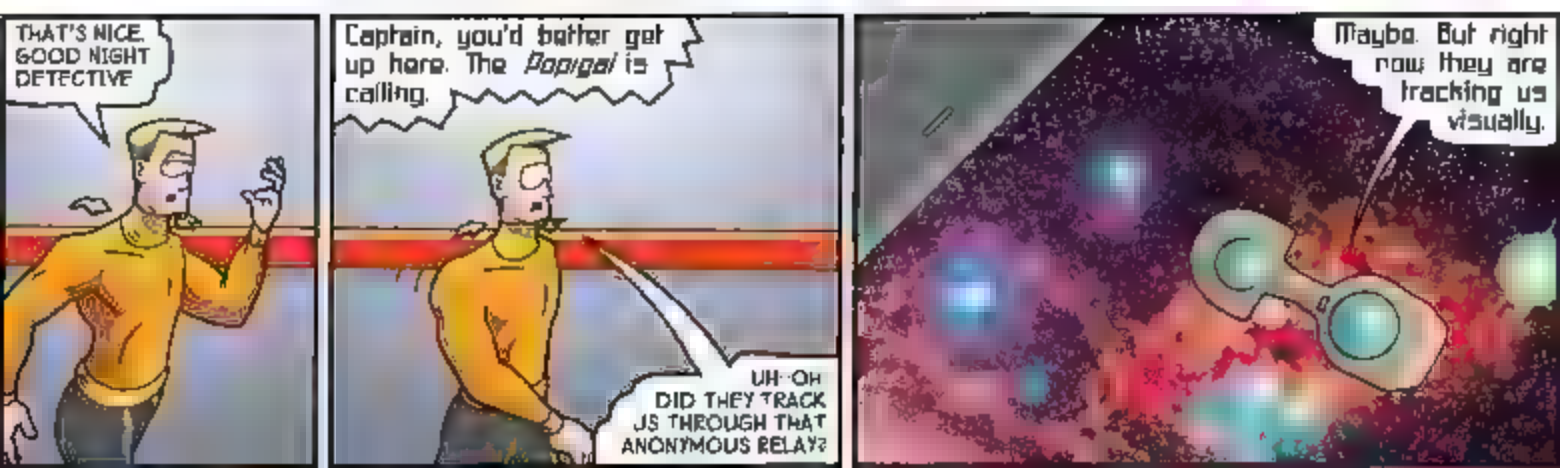

MEANWHILE
I can't believe they let us go. We should all be dead.
IF THEY'D STOPPED US, WE WOULD HAVE BEEN COMPLETELY CONVERTED TO ENERGY, AND BLOWN A WHOLE HEMISPHERE RIGHT OFF THE PLANET
That was your plan? You thought you were holding the planet hostage?
IT WORKED, DIDN'T IT?
I think you need a little science lesson.
I'LL DO THE CHEWING OUT HERE. RANK HATH ITS PRIVILEGES.


ELF, OUTBOUND TERAPORT INTERDICTION DOES *NOT* WORK LIKE YOU THINK IT DOES.
IF THEY HADN'T LET US GO, OUR EXPLOSIVE DEATHS WOULDN'T HAVE HAD MORE THAN A FART'S EFFECT ON THE PLANET'S SURFACE.
AND THE *POPIGAI* COULD HAVE CONTAINED THAT. IT WOULD HAVE BEEN LIKE A FART IN A *BAG*
Waking up to a bad teraport makes you colorful, sir.
YOU HAVE NO IDEA.

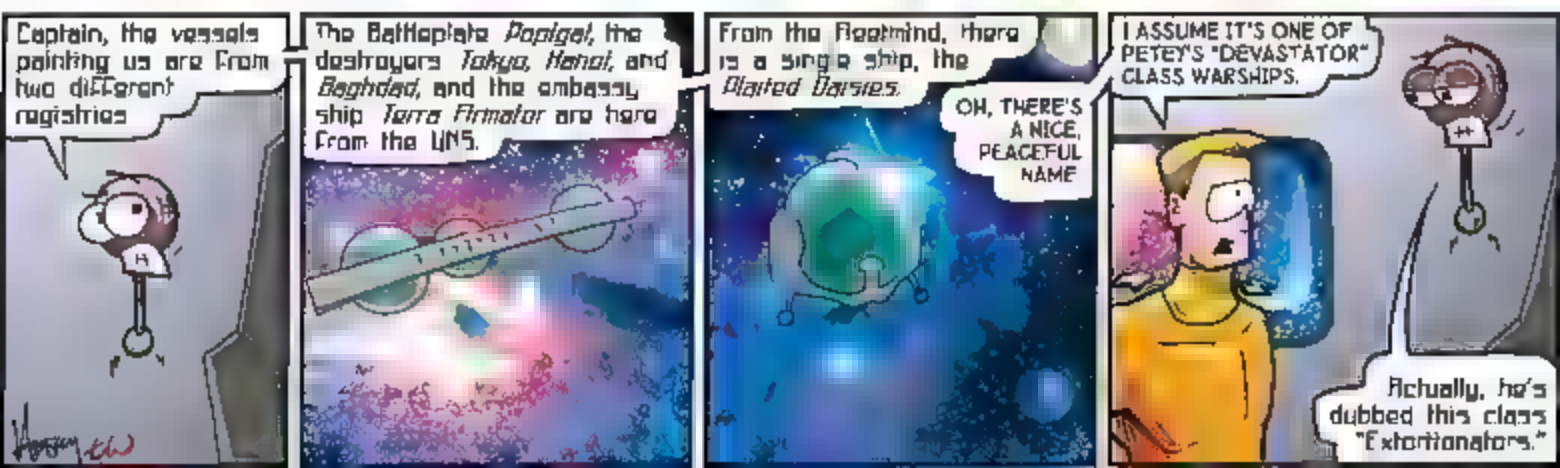

IF THERE WASN'T GOING TO BE A HUGE EXPLOSION, THEN WHY DID THEY LET US GO?
I DIDN'T HAVE THE PLANET HELD HOSTAGE. I JUST HAD US AND OUR SHIP
aaand the police officers on deck three. That must be the collateral that kept them from letting us disintegrate.
AND IT WORKED! JUST LIKE I PLANNED IT
IF TAGON MAKES ME GIVE YOU A MEDAL, I'M GOING TO PIN IT TO YOUR EYE.

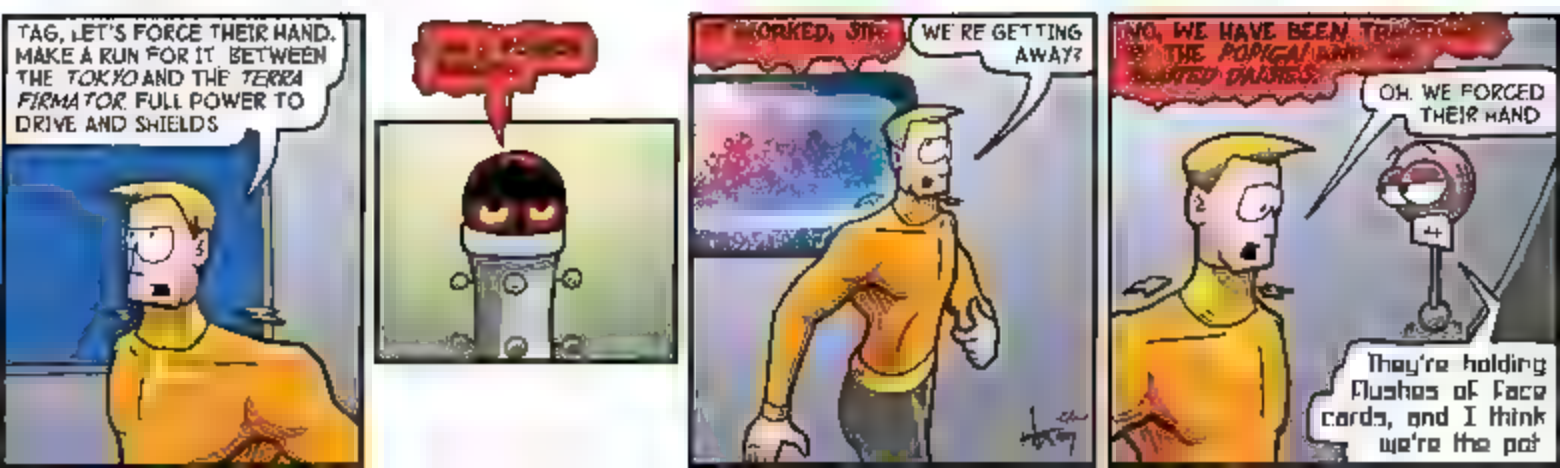

THE BRIG. IN THE FORWARD BLADE OF THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH AND GO
EACH CELL IS INDEPENDENTLY SUSPENDED, AND IS ONLY ACCESSIBLE THROUGH A RETRACTABLE DOCKING CLAMP.
ONCE THIS "DRAWBRIDGE" HAS BEEN PULLED BACK, THE CELL DOOR ONLY OPENS ONTO HARD VACUUM.
THE VACUUM IS KEPT FRESH THROUGH A SET OF VENTS IN THE HULL. IF CELLS ARE BREACHED, THEIR PRESSURE QUICKLY DROPS ALL THE WAY TO ZERO
Schlock Mercenary

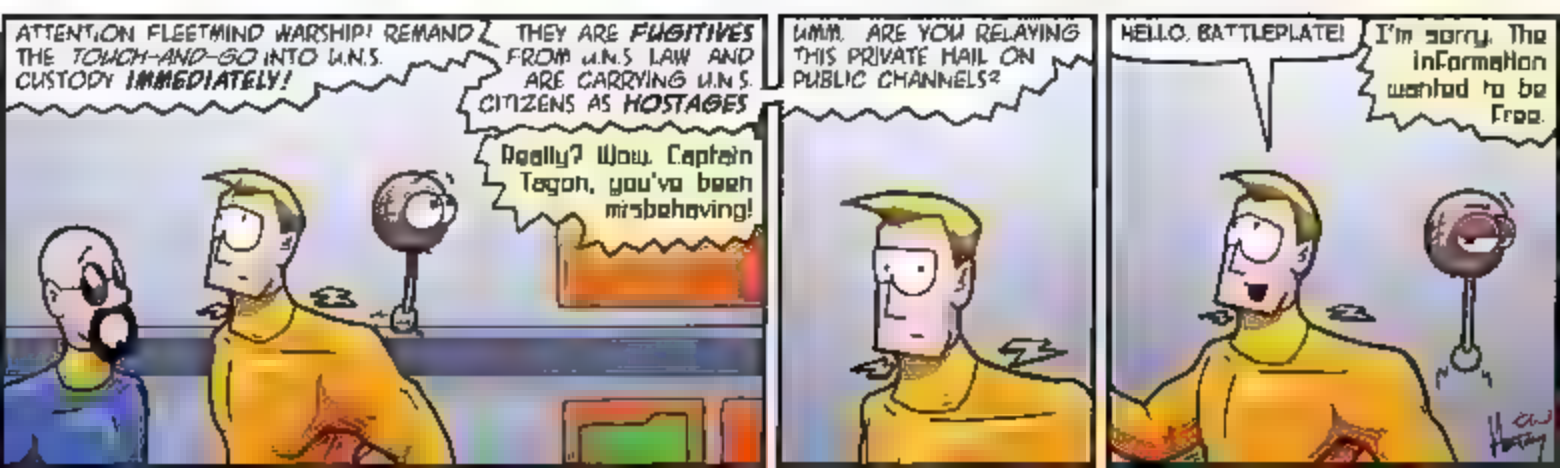
IT SOUNDS VERY SECURE, CAPTAIN.
I'D BE MORE ENTHUSIASTIC IF YOU WEREN'T PUTTING ME INTO IT
RELAX WE'LL FIND A COMMERCIAL TRANSPORT AND SEND YOU ALL HOME JUST AS SOON AS WE KNOW WE'VE EVADED PURSUIT
YOUR CELLS ARE COMFORTABLE, AND YOU CAN EVEN WATCH TV ALTHOUGH NOT REALITY TV.. THAT APPEARS TO BE GONE NOW
WE KNOW YOU HAD SOMETHING TO DO WITH THAT, CAPTAIN

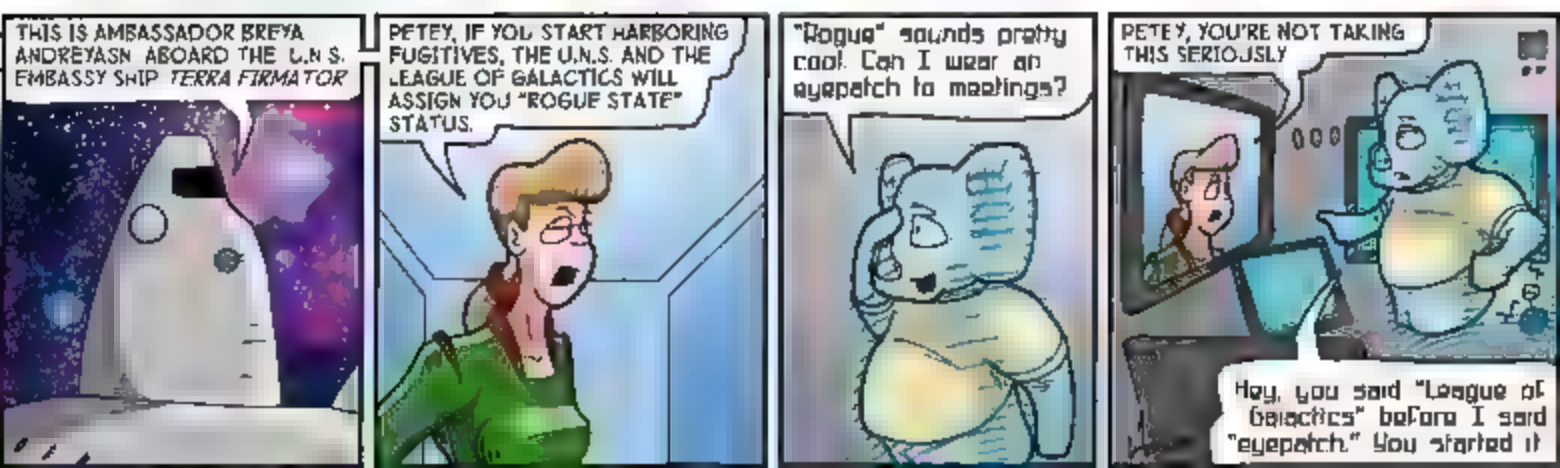

THAT'S NICE. GOOD NIGHT DETECTIVE
Captain, you'd better get up here. The *Popigal* is calling.
UH-OH DID THEY TRACK US THROUGH THAT ANONYMOUS RELAY?
Maybe. But right now they are tracking us visually.

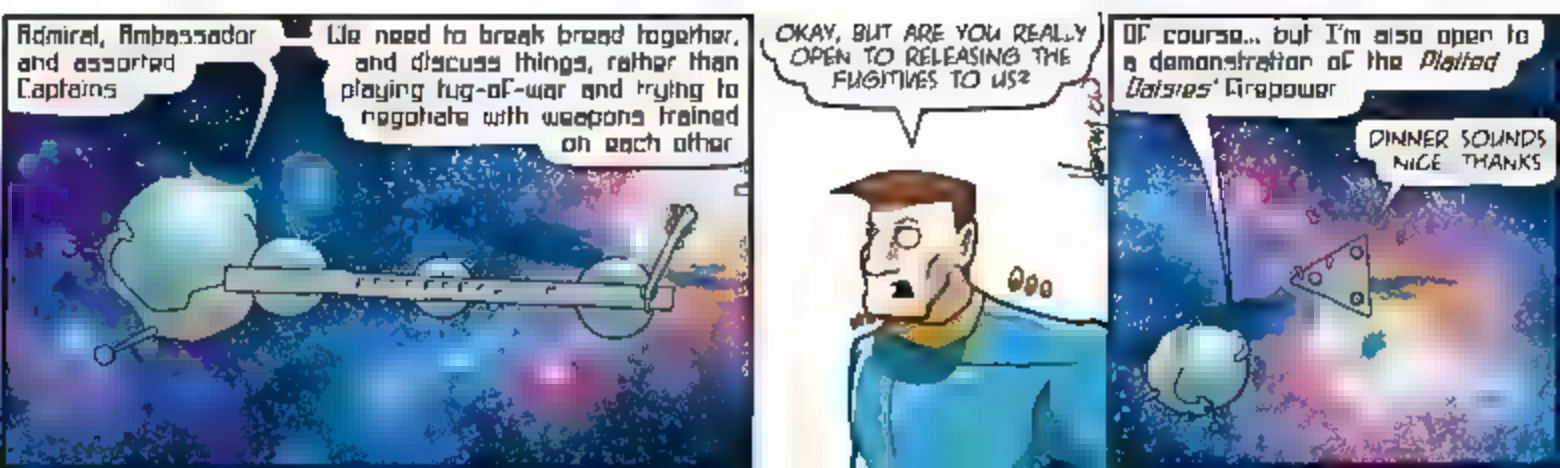
TAG, GET US OUT OF HERE!
I'M UNABLE TO COMPLY, CAPTAIN.
THERE ARE THREE TERAPORT INTERDICTION SYSTEMS IN OPERATION, AND WE ARE BEING PAINTED BY 3E DIFFERENT WARSHIPS.
I THOUGHT YOU WERE ORDERED TO 'PORT US SOMEPLACE SAFE!
INDEED. IT APPEARS THAT OUR PRESENCE AND SAFETY ARE MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE FACTORS.

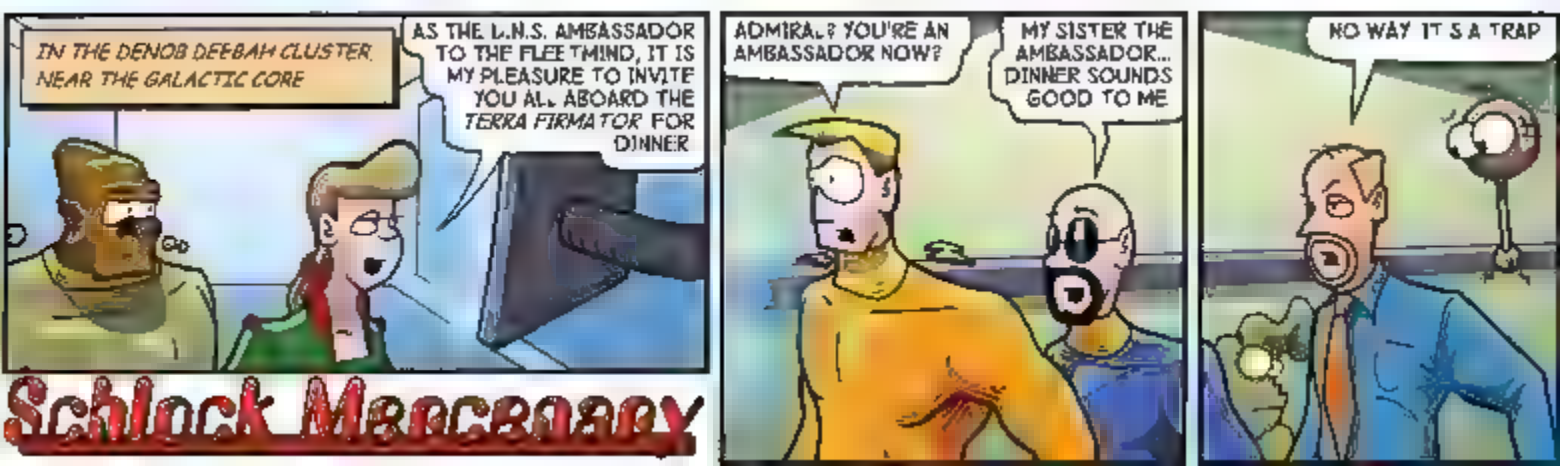

Captain, the vessels painting us are from two different registries
The Battleplate *Papigal*, the destroyers *Tokyo*, *Hanoi*, and *Baghdad*, and the embassy ship *Terra Firmator* are here from the UNS.
From the Fleetmind, there is a single ship, the *Plated Daisies*.
OH, THERE'S A NICE, PEACEFUL NAME
I ASSUME IT'S ONE OF PETEY'S "DEVASTATOR" CLASS WARSHIPS.
Actually, he's dubbed this class "Extortionators."


TAG, LET'S FORCE THEIR HAND. MAKE A RUN FOR IT BETWEEN THE TOKYO AND THE TERRA FIRMATOR. FULL POWER TO DRIVE AND SHIELDS
WE'RE GETTING AWAY?
OH. WE FORCED THEIR HAND
They're holding flushes of face cards, and I think we're the pot

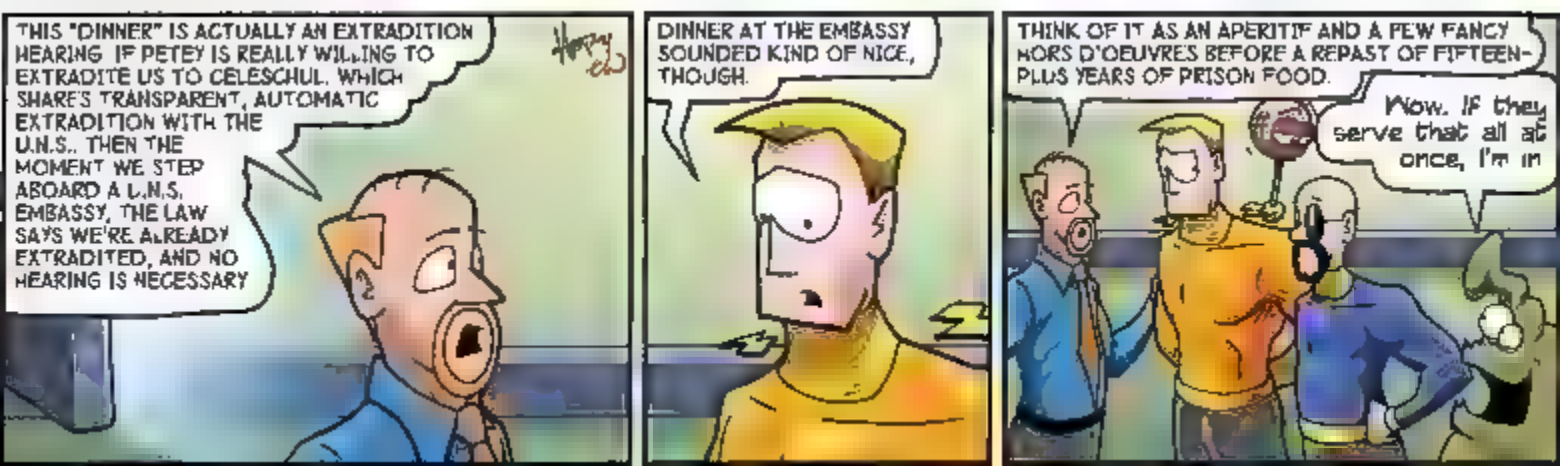

ATTENTION FLEETMIND WARSHIP! REMAND THE TOUCH-AND-GO INTO U.N.S. CUSTODY IMMEDIATELY!
THEY ARE FUGITIVES FROM U.N.S LAW AND ARE CARRYING U.N.S. CITIZENS AS HOSTAGES
Really? Wow. Captain Tagon, you've been misbehaving!
UMM. ARE YOU RELAYING THIS PRIVATE MAIL ON PUBLIC CHANNELS?
HELLO, BATTLEPLATE!
I'm sorry. The information wanted to be free.


THIS IS AMBASSADOR BREYA ANDREYASN ABOARD THE U.N.S. EMBASSY SHIP TERRA FIRMATOR
PETEY, IF YOU START HARBORING FUGITIVES, THE U.N.S. AND THE LEAGUE OF GALACTICS WILL ASSIGN YOU "ROGUE STATE" STATUS.
"Rogue" sounds pretty cool. Can I wear an eyepatch to meetings?
PETEY, YOU'RE NOT TAKING THIS SERIOUSLY
Hey, you said "League of Galactics" before I said "eyepatch." You started it


Admiral, Ambassador and assorted Captains
We need to break bread together, and discuss things, rather than playing tug-of-war and trying to negotiate with weapons trained on each other
OKAY, BUT ARE YOU REALLY OPEN TO RELEASING THE FUGITIVES TO US?
Of course... but I'm also open to a demonstration of the *Plated Daisies'* firepower
DINNER SOUNDS NICE. THANKS


IN THE DENOB DEEBAH CLUSTER, NEAR THE GALACTIC CORE
AS THE L.N.S. AMBASSADOR TO THE FLEETMIND, IT IS MY PLEASURE TO INVITE YOU ALL ABOARD THE TERRA FIRMATOR FOR DINNER
ADMIRAL? YOU'RE AN AMBASSADOR NOW?
MY SISTER THE AMBASSADOR... DINNER SOUNDS GOOD TO ME
NO WAY IT'S A TRAP
Schlock Mercenary

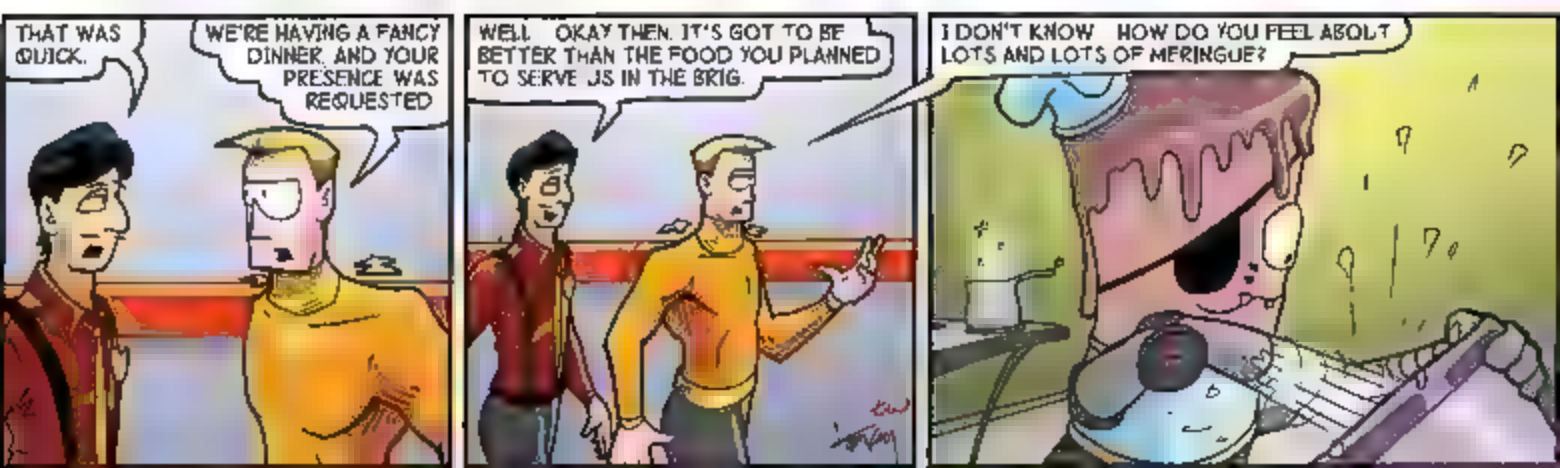
THE *TERRA FIRMATOR* MAY BE A FORMER BATTLESHIP BUT IT HAS BEEN BOTH LOBOTOMIZED AND DECOMMISSIONED. IT IS JUST AN EMBASSY WITH LEGS THESE DAYS.
THAT'S EXACTLY THE PROBLEM. IT'S AN *EMBASSY*
MASSEY ARE YOU GOING SOMEPLACE WITH THIS?
GOING? WELL, AS A FUGITIVE PURSUED BY CELESCHUL LAW ENFORCEMENT I'M NOT *GOING* TO HANG OUT ABOARD A U.N.S. EMBASSY


THIS "DINNER" IS ACTUALLY AN EXTRADITION HEARING. IF PETEY IS REALLY WILLING TO EXTRADITE US TO CELESCHUL, WHICH SHARES TRANSPARENT, AUTOMATIC EXTRADITION WITH THE U.N.S., THEN THE MOMENT WE STEP ABOARD A U.N.S. EMBASSY, THE LAW SAYS WE'RE ALREADY EXTRADITED, AND NO HEARING IS NECESSARY
DINNER AT THE EMBASSY SOUNDED KIND OF NICE, THOUGH.
THINK OF IT AS AN APERITIF AND A FEW FANCY HORS D'OEUVRES BEFORE A REPAST OF FIFTEEN-PLUS YEARS OF PRISON FOOD.
Wow. If they serve that all at once, I'm in

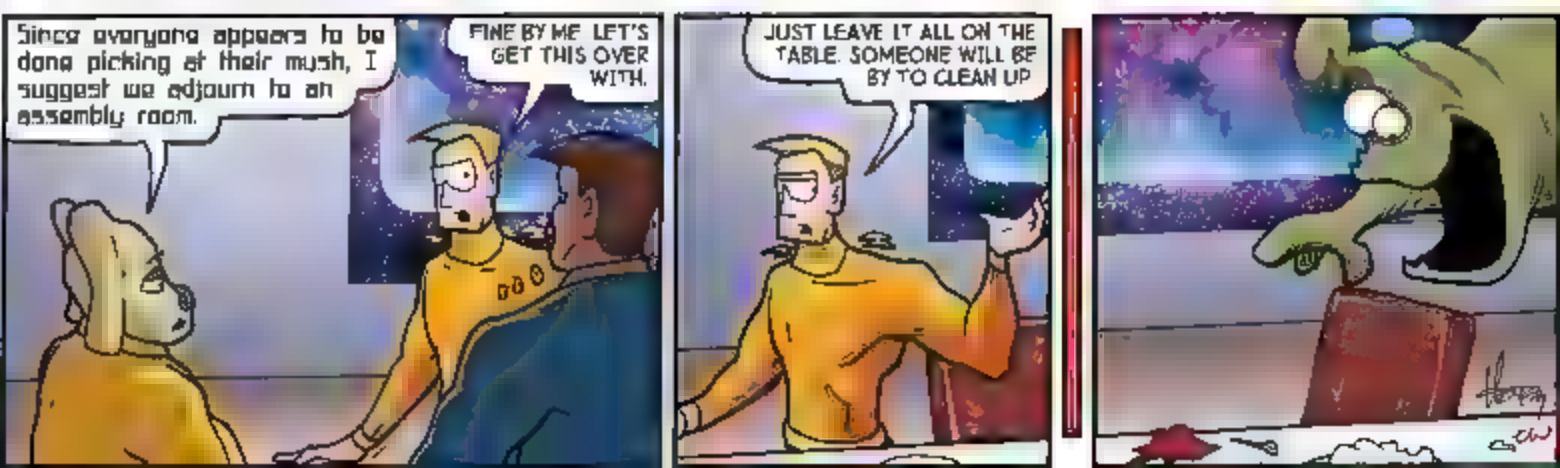
WHILE WE'RE ON THE SUBJECT, NONE OF TAGON'S TOUGHS WILL BE BOARDING ANY U.N.S. VESSEL FOR DINNER THIS EVENING.
You're all welcome aboard the *Plaited Daisies*. There is room, and room to spare.
CONSIDERING YOUR RECENT ANTICS, NO FLEETMIND SHIP CAN BE CONSIDERED NEUTRAL TERRITORY
ARE YOU GUYS REALLY ARGUING OVER WHERE TO EAT DINNER?
IT'S ONE OF THE MORE SAVAGE TOOLS IN THE DIPLOMATIC ARSENAL.

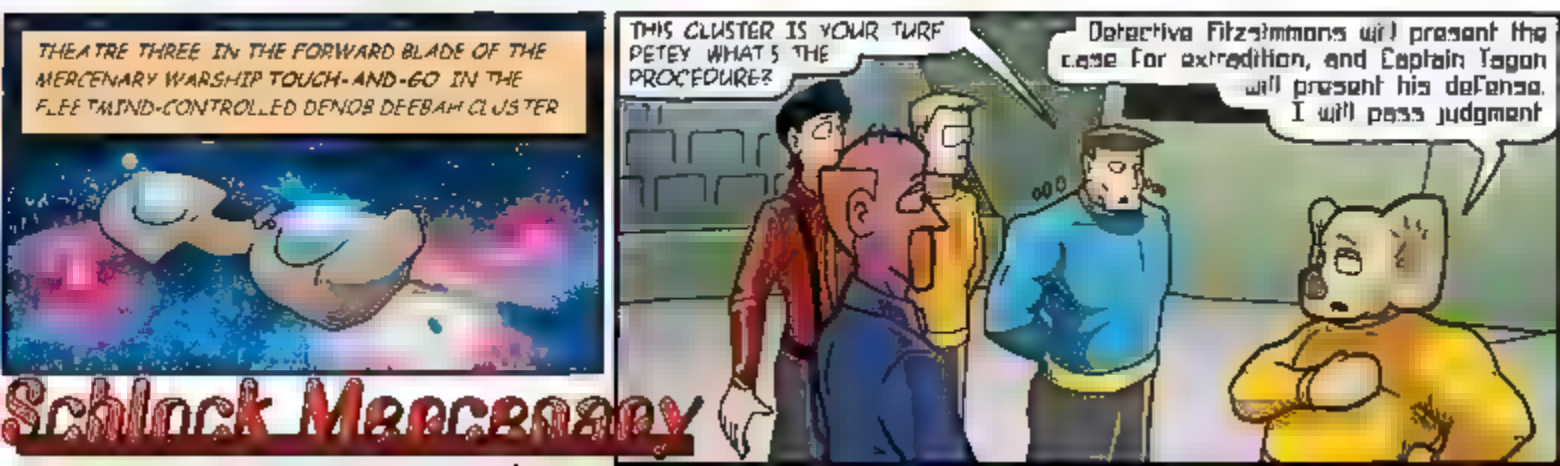
If the U.N.S. won't come to me, and the Toughs won't come to the U.N.S., that leaves the *Touch-and-Go* as our only possible venue. Can we agree to allow the defendants to serve as our hosts for dinner?
OKAY
FAIR ENOUGH.
I'LL ALERT OUR CHEF
YIPPEE!

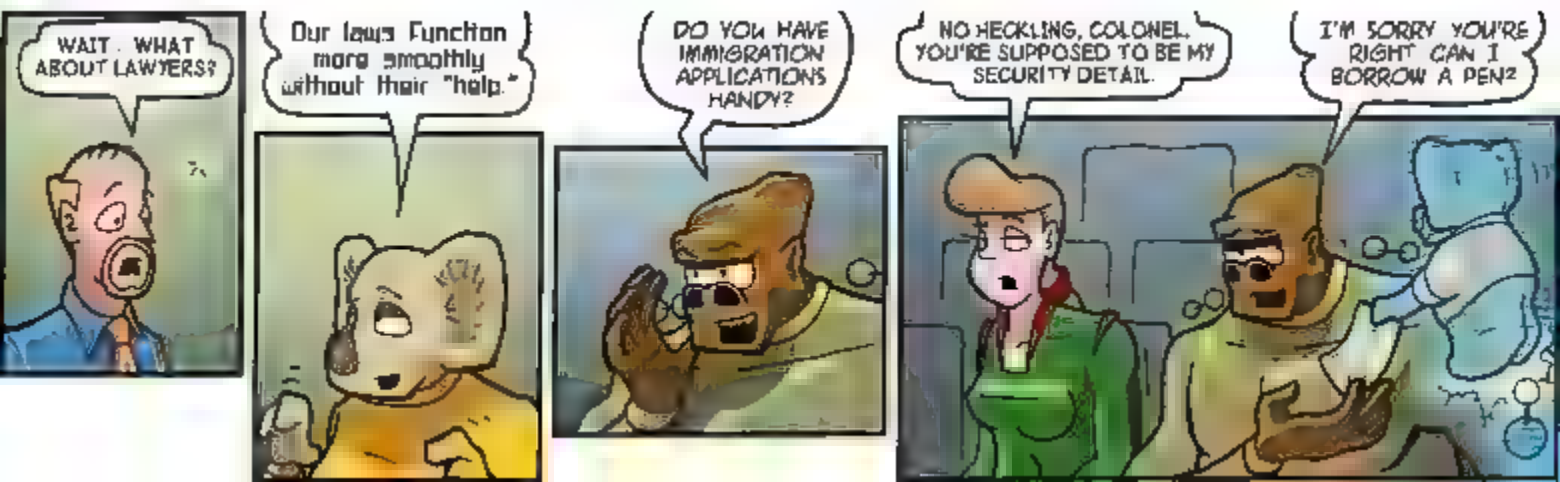
TELL ME YOU CAN GET US OFF THE HOOK MASSEY
I CAN GET US OFF THE HOOK.
CONVINCE ME THAT YOU CAN GET US OFF THE HOOK MASSEY
MY LEGAL JUDO IS STRONG. OBSERVE. MY LAWYER-FU!
SHODAN TOLD ME YOU *PASSED* HIS UNARMED COMBAT COURSE.
HIS COUSIN NEEDED SOME LEGAL ADVICE.


THAT WAS QUICK.
WE'RE HAVING A FANCY DINNER, AND YOUR PRESENCE WAS REQUESTED
WELL... OKAY THEN. IT'S GOT TO BE BETTER THAN THE FOOD YOU PLANNED TO SERVE US IN THE BRIG.
I DON'T KNOW... HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT LOTS AND LOTS OF MERINGUE?

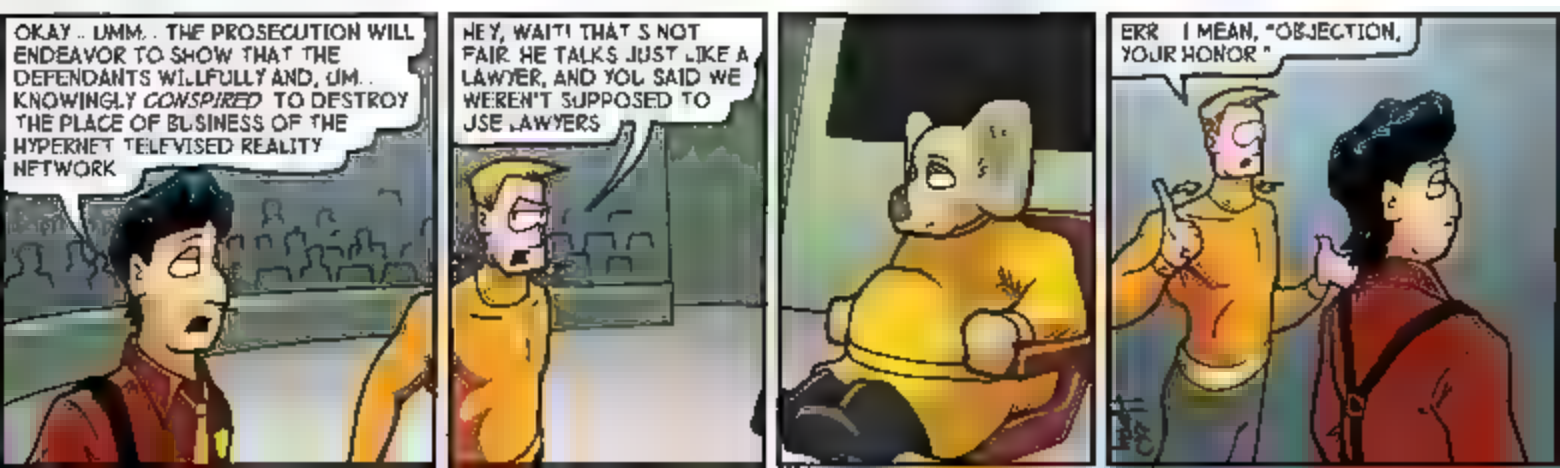
DINNER IS SERVED! IT HAS BEEN MY PLEASURE AS THE COMPANY CHEF AND AS A FORMER DIPLOMAT MYSELF TO PREPARE THE REPAST FOR THIS MOMENTOUS OCCASION
I KNOW DIPLOMATS ARE ALL DECLAWED, TOOTHLESS NEUTERS, SO I DIDN'T SPARE THE WHISK ON THIS EVENING'S MEAL ENJOY!
MMMM. MASHED POTATOS AND OATMEAL MY FAVORITE.
SOME VANDAL PUREED THE BANANAS

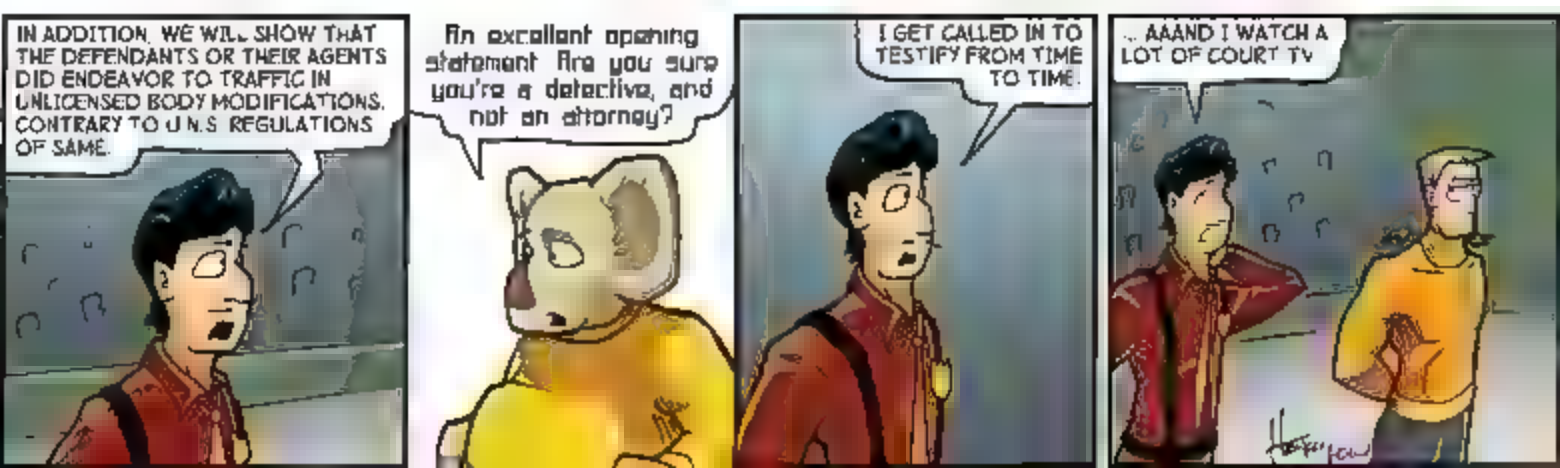

Since everyone appears to be done picking at their mush, I suggest we adjourn to an assembly room.
FINE BY ME. LET'S GET THIS OVER WITH.
JUST LEAVE IT ALL ON THE TABLE. SOMEONE WILL BE BY TO CLEAN UP


THEATRE THREE IN THE FORWARD BLADE OF THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH-AND-GO IN THE FLEET MIND-CONTROLLED DENOB DEEBAH CLUSTER
Schlock Mercenary
THIS CLUSTER IS YOUR TURF PETEY WHAT'S THE PROCEDURE?
Detective Fitzsimmons will present the case for extradition, and Captain Tagon will present his defense. I will pass judgment

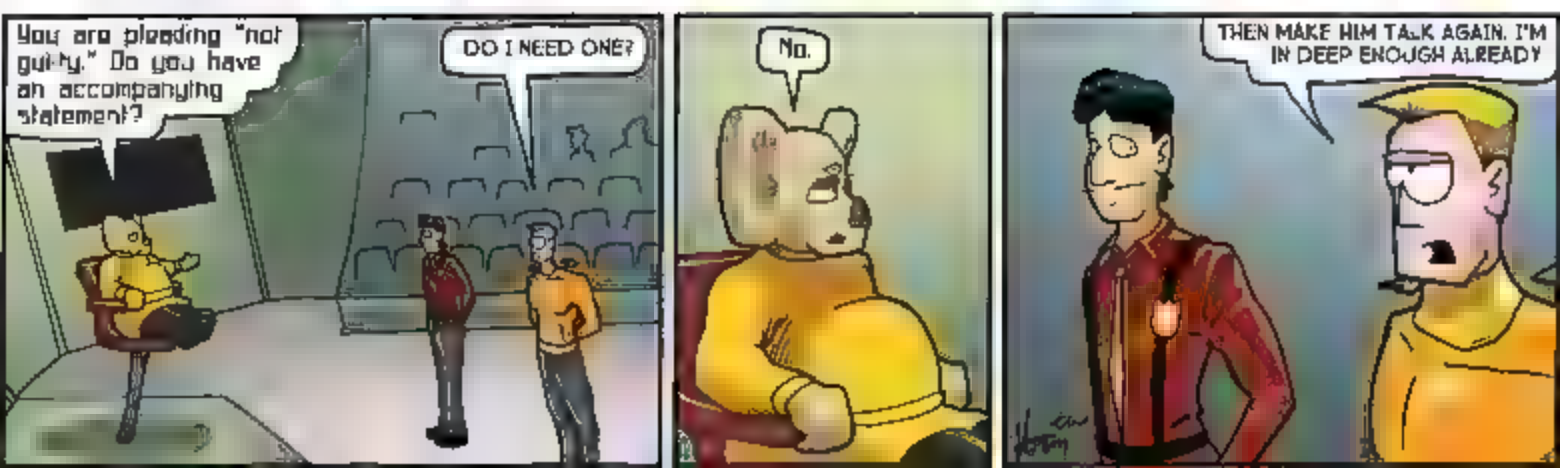

WAIT. WHAT ABOUT LAWYERS?
Our laws function more smoothly without their "help."
DO YOU HAVE IMMIGRATION APPLICATIONS HANDY?
NO HECKLING, COLONEL. YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE MY SECURITY DETAIL.
I'M SORRY. YOU'RE RIGHT. CAN I BORROW A PEN?

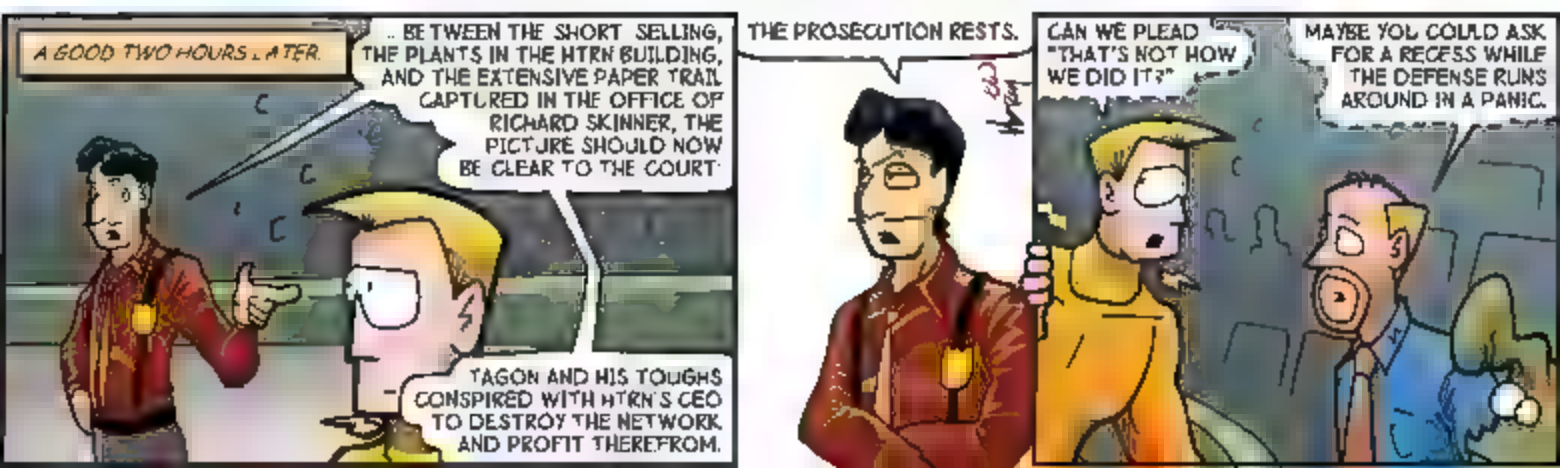
PETEY... UMM.. MASSEY IS A MUCH BETTER SPEAKER THAN I AM, COULDN'T I, YOU KNOW... LET HIM DO THE TALKING?
Captain, under these circumstances, requesting the intercession of an attorney is a sign of a guilty conscience.
...which is funny, because, you and I both know you are definitely guilty of *something*.
It will please the court to hear you say exactly *what*.


OKAY.. UMM.. THE PROSECUTION WILL ENDEAVOR TO SHOW THAT THE DEFENDANTS WILLFULLY AND, UM.. KNOWINGLY *CONSPIRED* TO DESTROY THE PLACE OF BUSINESS OF THE HYPERNET TELEVISED REALITY NETWORK
HEY, WAIT! THAT'S NOT FAIR. HE TALKS JUST LIKE A LAWYER, AND YOU SAID WE WEREN'T SUPPOSED TO USE LAWYERS
ERR... I MEAN, "OBJECTION, YOUR HONOR."

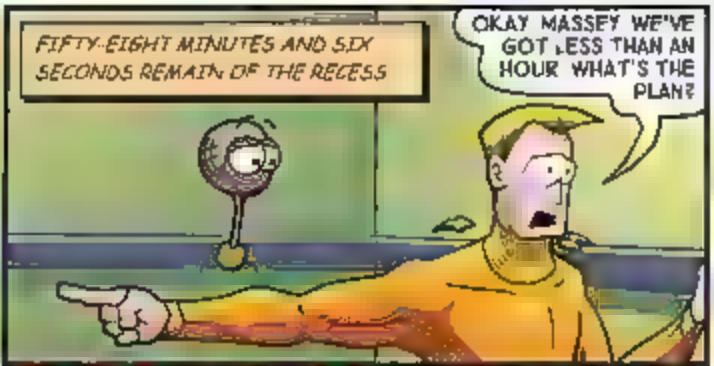

IN ADDITION, WE WILL SHOW THAT THE DEFENDANTS OR THEIR AGENTS DID ENDEAVOR TO TRAFFIC IN UNLICENSED BODY MODIFICATIONS, CONTRARY TO U.N.S. REGULATIONS OF SAME.
An excellent opening statement. Are you sure you're a detective, and not an attorney?
I GET CALLED IN TO TESTIFY FROM TIME TO TIME.
... AAAND I WATCH A LOT OF COURT TV

Captain, you have heard the charges. How do you plead? Before you answer, you should know that if you plead "guilty" you'll be immediately extradited, and U.N.S. law will take over
NOT GUILTY
Also, it's not very nice to lie in court
BUT IT BEATS EXTRADITION.


You are pleading "not guilty." Do you have an accompanying statement?
DO I NEED ONE?
No.
THEN MAKE HIM TALK AGAIN. I'M IN DEEP ENOUGH ALREADY

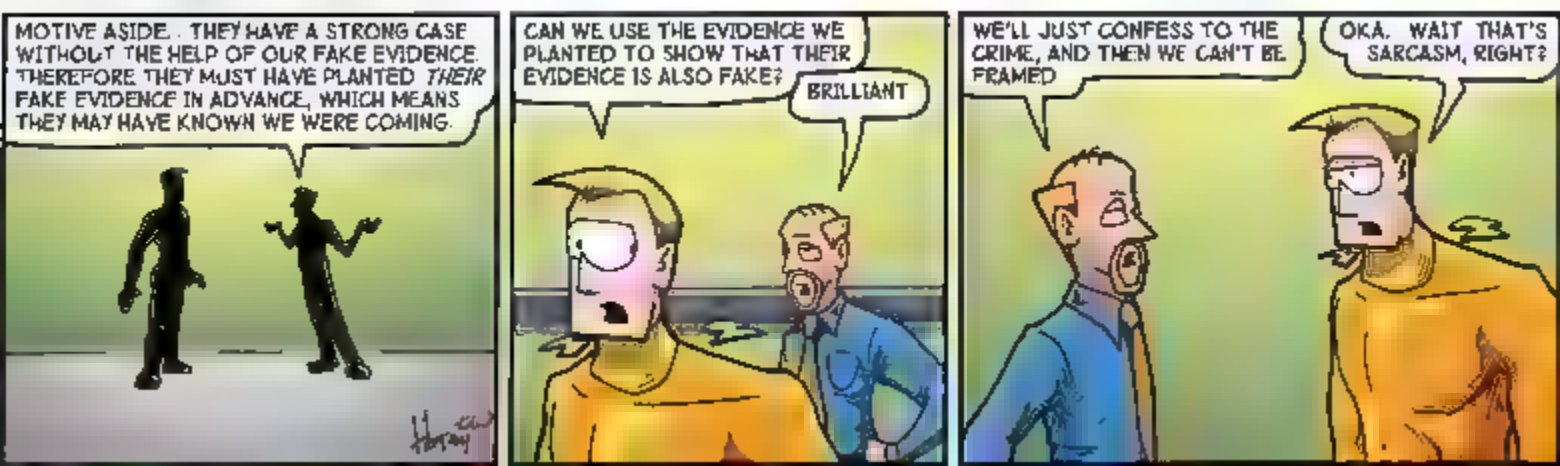

A GOOD TWO HOURS LATER.
.. BETWEEN THE SHORT SELLING, THE PLANTS IN THE HTRN BUILDING, AND THE EXTENSIVE PAPER TRAIL CAPTURED IN THE OFFICE OF RICHARD SKINNER, THE PICTURE SHOULD NOW BE CLEAR TO THE COURT.
TAGON AND HIS TOUGHS CONSPIRED WITH HTRN'S CEO TO DESTROY THE NETWORK AND PROFIT THEREFROM.
THE PROSECUTION RESTS.
CAN WE PLEAD "THAT'S NOT HOW WE DID IT?"
MAYBE YOU COULD ASK FOR A RECESS WHILE THE DEFENSE RUNS AROUND IN A PANIC.

It's your turn now, Captain
RIGHT
I'D LIKE TO RECESS A REQUEST IN DEFENSE OF THE... UM... WITNESSES, FOR UMM... UH. TIME OUT?
Motion granted
THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU.

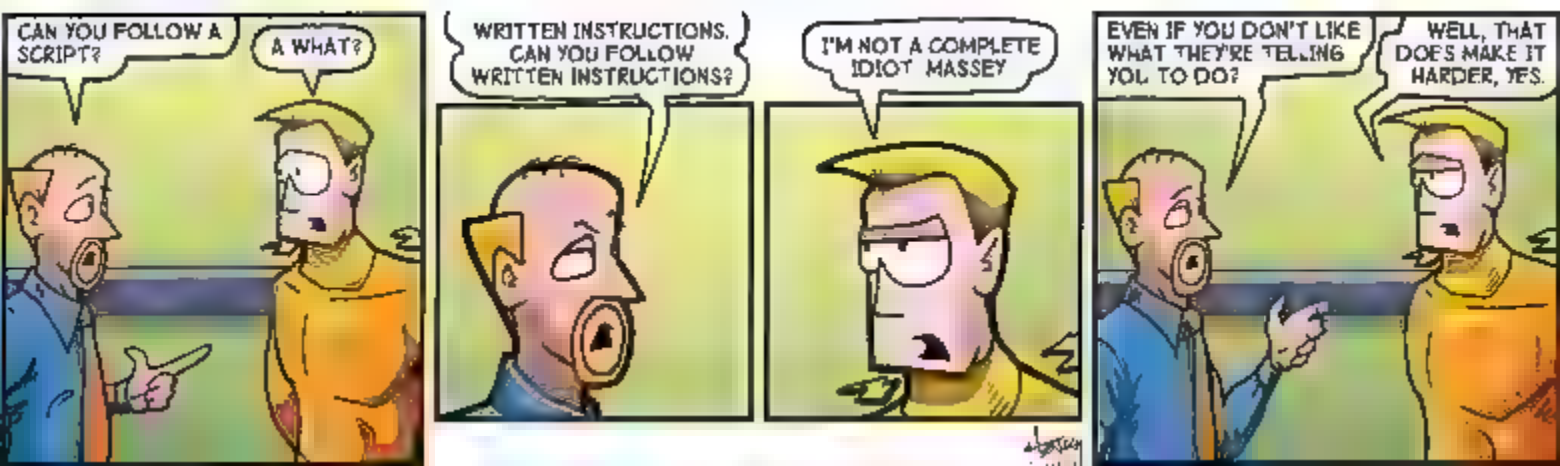


Schlock Mercenary

We couldn't have been the only ones short selling that day
GOOD POINT GET ON THAT
GET ON *WHAT?* I DON'T UNDERSTAND.
MOTIVE. OUR MOTIVE WAS PROFIT, OBVIOUSLY BUT IF WE'RE BEING FRAMED, THEN SOMEBODY ELSE OUT THERE *ALSO* HAS A MOTIVE. MAYBE THEY WERE SHORT SELLING, TOO.
BUT THE TIMING IS WRONG OR RATHER, THE TIMING IS PERFECT
WHAT'S
JUST LISTEN, OKAY?

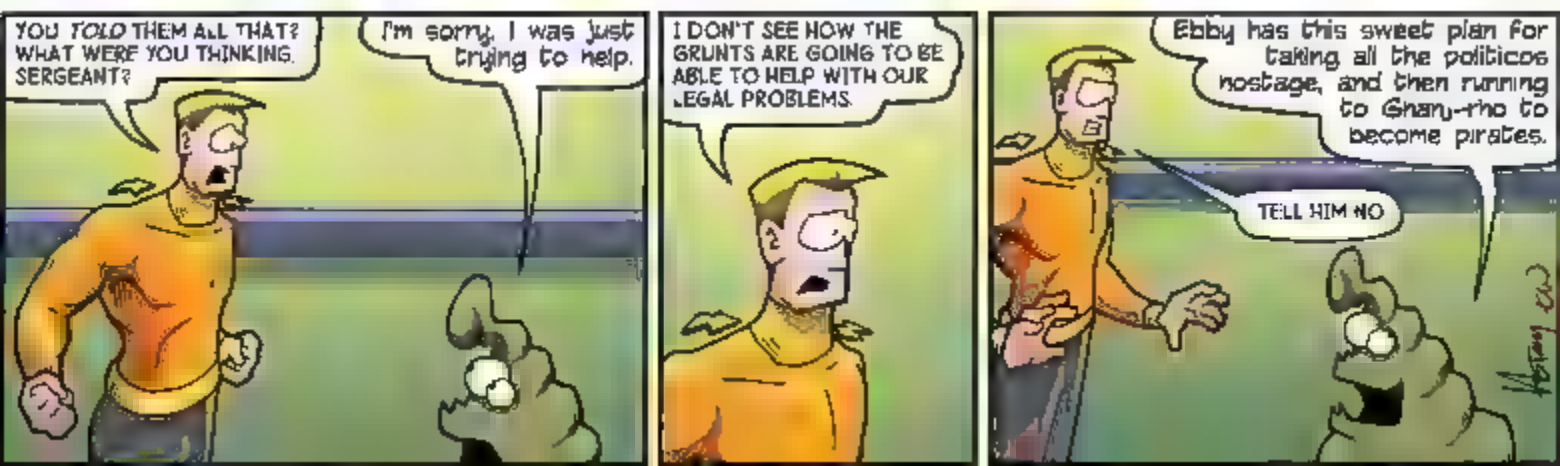

MOTIVE ASIDE. THEY HAVE A STRONG CASE WITHOUT THE HELP OF OUR FAKE EVIDENCE. THEREFORE THEY MUST HAVE PLANTED *THEIR* FAKE EVIDENCE IN ADVANCE, WHICH MEANS THEY MAY HAVE KNOWN WE WERE COMING.
CAN WE USE THE EVIDENCE WE PLANTED TO SHOW THAT THEIR EVIDENCE IS ALSO FAKE?
BRILLIANT
WE'LL JUST CONFESS TO THE CRIME, AND THEN WE CAN'T BE FRAMED
OKA. WAIT THAT'S SARCASM, RIGHT?

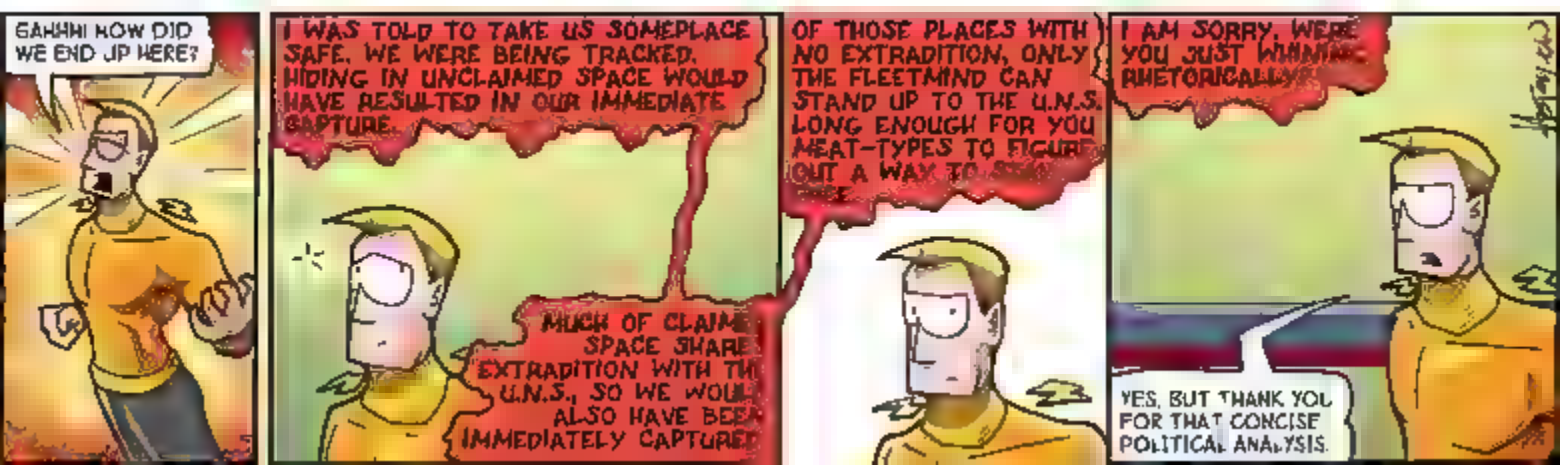
WAIT.. WHAT IF THIS WAS SOME KIND OF A STING OPERATION?
WHAT IF WE WERE BEING SET UP FROM THE VERY BEGINNING?
THEN THEY SHOULDN'T HAVE LET US BLOW UP THAT BUILDING.
YOU KNOW. CONFESSING TO AVOID PROSECUTION IS A TIME-HONORED STRATEGY
I DON'T WANT TO BE HONORED WITH TIME. HONOR ME WITH "SLAP-ON-THE-WRIST," OR MAYBE EVEN "SCOT FREE"


CAN YOU FOLLOW A SCRIPT?
A WHAT?
WRITTEN INSTRUCTIONS. CAN YOU FOLLOW WRITTEN INSTRUCTIONS?
I'M NOT A COMPLETE IDIOT MASSEY
EVEN IF YOU DON'T LIKE WHAT THEY'RE TELLING YOU TO DO?
WELL, THAT DOES MAKE IT HARDER, YES.

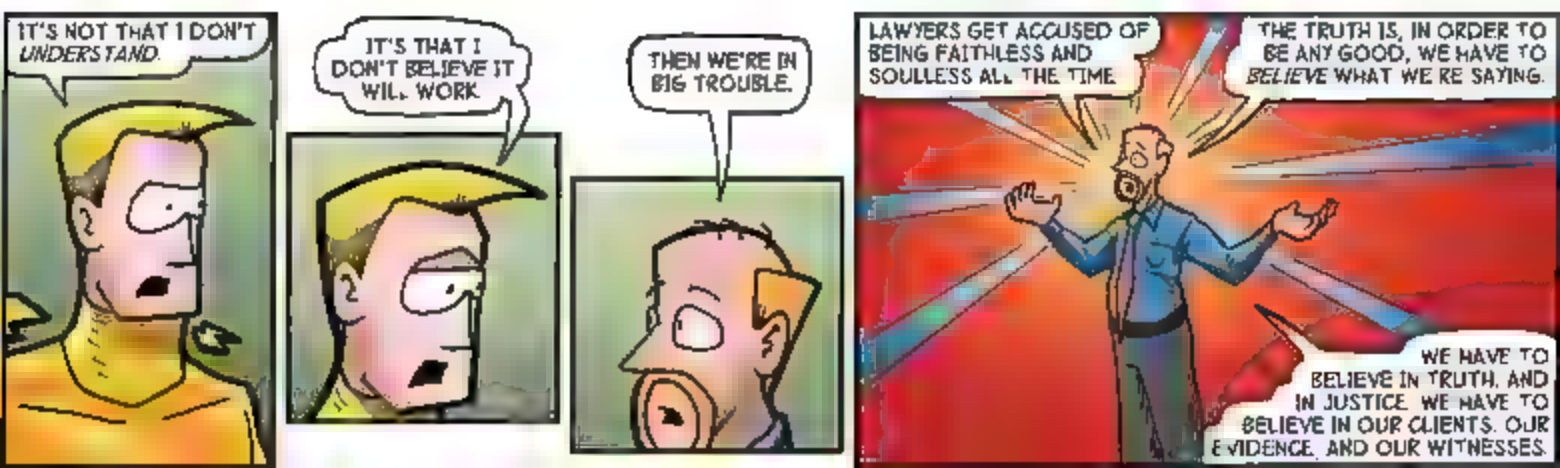
I DON'T TRUST YOU TO EXTEMPORIZE ON THIS PLAN, AND PETEY WON'T LET ME DO THE TALKING FOR YOU.
SO... I'M GOING TO WRITE OUT THE SCRIPT FOR YOU, AND YOU'RE GOING TO STICK TO IT WHEN WE GET BACK INTO THAT KANGAROO COURTROOM IN FORTY-FIVE MINUTES.
I... OKAY
IT LOOKS LIKE YOU'RE WRITING OUT A CONFESSION.
AND HERE I HOPED I COULD DISTRACT YOU WITH THE PROMISE OF KANGAROOS.

Captain, some of the troops are wondering how it's going.
They weren't invited to dinner, and they didn't get to come to the assembly, but they know we've got guests.
NOW IS PROBABLY NOT THE TIME TO TELL THEM THAT WE'RE ALL FACING EXTRADITION, PROSECUTION, AND JAIL TIME FOR THAT LAST JOB.
Yeah that would be dumb, cause I already told them *that*.


YOU TOLD THEM ALL THAT? WHAT WERE YOU THINKING, SERGEANT?
I'm sorry. I was just trying to help.
I DON'T SEE HOW THE GRUNTS ARE GOING TO BE ABLE TO HELP WITH OUR LEGAL PROBLEMS.
Ebby has this sweet plan for taking all the politicos hostage, and then running to Ghany-rho to become pirates.
TELL HIM NO


GAHHH! HOW DID WE END UP HERE?
I WAS TOLD TO TAKE US SOMEPLACE SAFE. WE WERE BEING TRACKED. HIDING IN UNCLAIMED SPACE WOULD HAVE RESULTED IN OUR IMMEDIATE CAPTURE.
MUCH OF CLAIMED SPACE SHARES EXTRADITION WITH THE U.N.S., SO WE WOULD ALSO HAVE BEEN IMMEDIATELY CAPTURED.
OF THOSE PLACES WITH NO EXTRADITION, ONLY THE FLEETMIND CAN STAND UP TO THE U.N.S. LONG ENOUGH FOR YOU MEAT-TYPES TO FIGURE OUT A WAY TO STAY FREE.
I AM SORRY. WERE YOU JUST WHINING RHETORICALLY?
YES, BUT THANK YOU FOR THAT CONCISE POLITICAL ANALYSIS.

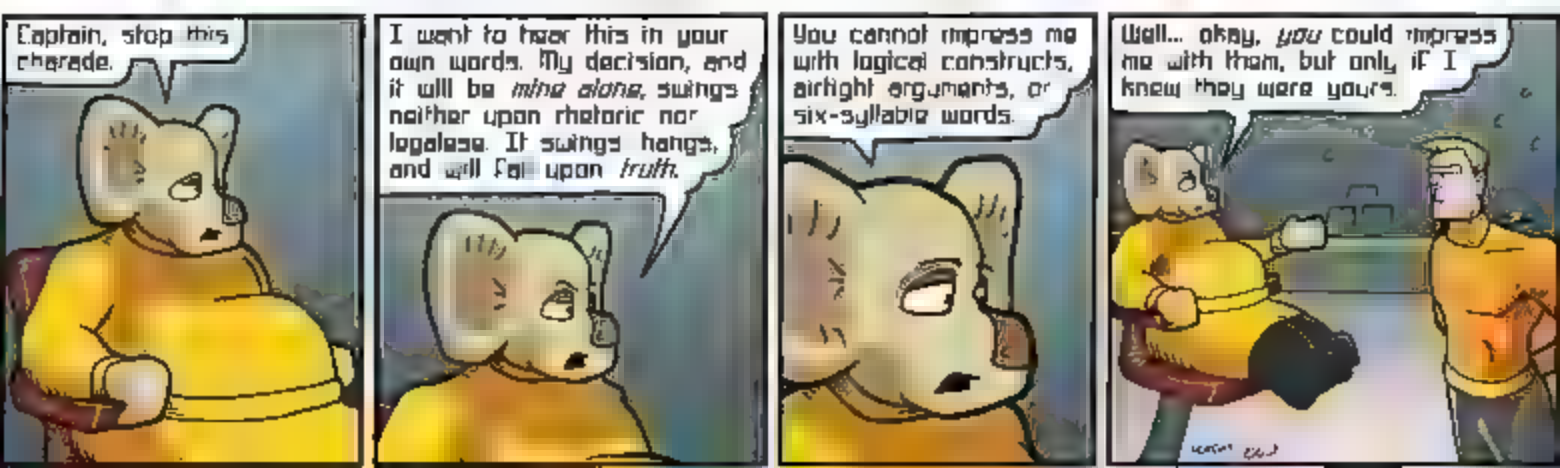
BACK IN THE IMPROMPTU COURTROOM
REMEMBER, CAPTAIN.. ALL YOU NEED TO DO IS STICK TO THIS SCRIPT OUR STORY IS ALL THERE AND IT WILL WORK
OKAY.. BUT I'M NOT SO SURE ABOUT THIS "CONFESSION" THING
THE ONLY WAY WE CAN
I KNOW! I KNOW! YOU'VE EXPLAINED IT FIVE TIMES ALREADY
Schlock Mercenary

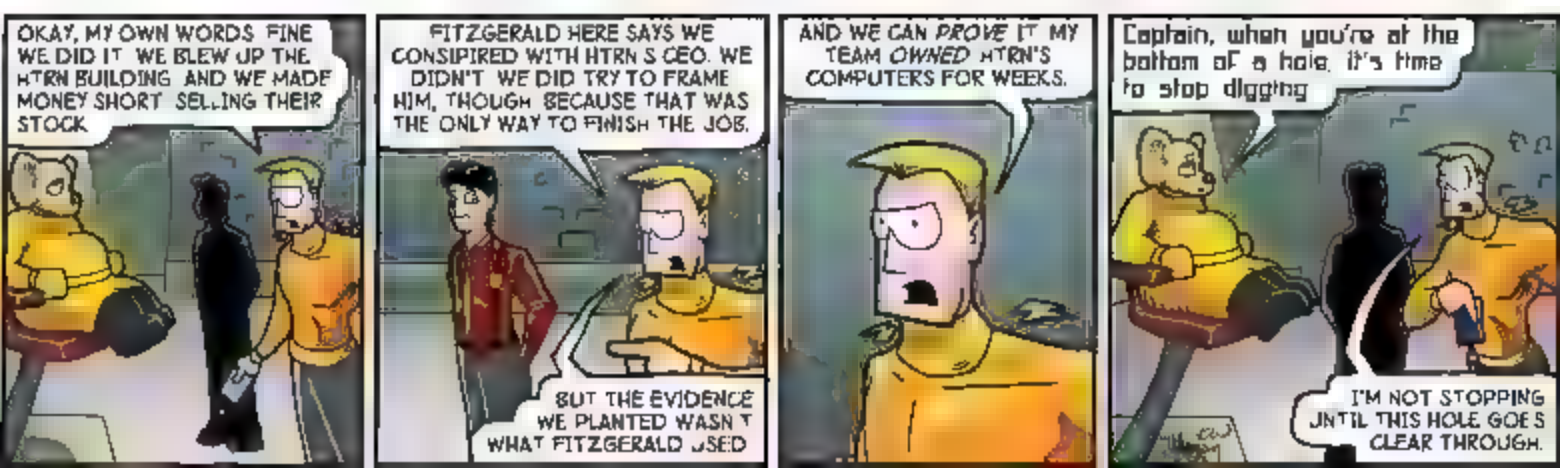

IT'S NOT THAT I DON'T UNDERSTAND.
IT'S THAT I DON'T BELIEVE IT WILL WORK.
THEN WE'RE IN BIG TROUBLE.
LAWYERS GET ACCUSED OF BEING FAITHLESS AND SOULLESS ALL THE TIME.
THE TRUTH IS, IN ORDER TO BE ANY GOOD, WE HAVE TO BELIEVE WHAT WE'RE SAYING.
WE HAVE TO BELIEVE IN TRUTH, AND IN JUSTICE. WE HAVE TO BELIEVE IN OUR CLIENTS, OUR EVIDENCE, AND OUR WITNESSES.

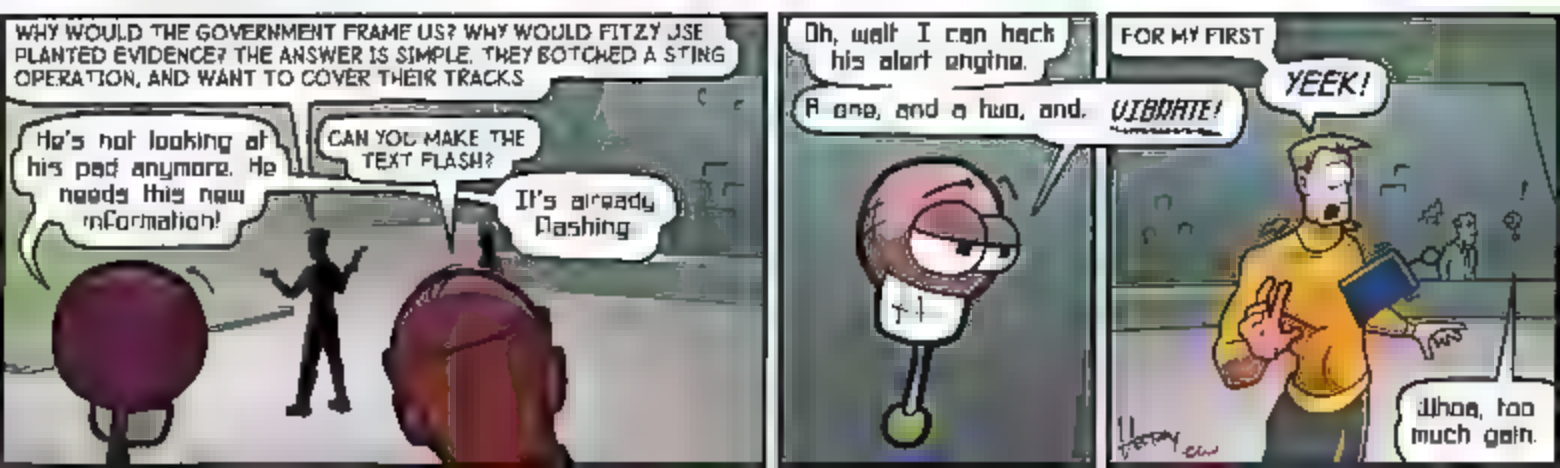
WE HAVE TO BELIEVE THAT WE ARE *RIGHT*, AND ARE DOING THE *RIGHT* THING, AND THAT *RIGHT* WILL PREVAIL
AND THAT SCRIPT THERE? THAT'S *RIGHT*. *BELIEVE* IN IT, BECAUSE I KNOW I DO
NOW GET OUT THERE AND *TESTIFY*.
OKAY.
Psst! I found something important. We need to adjust the script
OH, I DON'T BELIEVE THIS

Captain, are you ready to present your defense?
I AM, YOUR HONOR
THE DEFENSE WILL PRESENT INTRO... UM. CONVERTIBLE?
HANG ON.
Incontrovertible
IS THAT WHAT THIS SAYS?

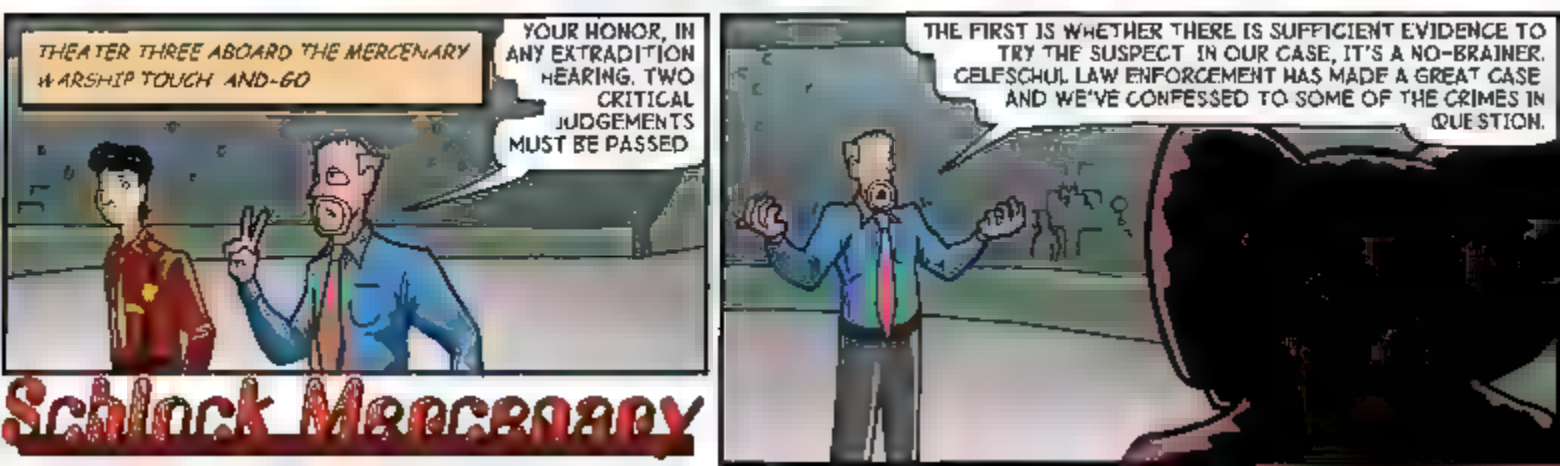
AS I WAS SAYING *INCONTROVERTIBLE* EVIDENCE THAT THE GOVERNMENT IS FRAMING US FOR THEIR MISTAKES
OUR ACTIONS, WHICH WE WILL DESCRIBE IN DETAIL, WILL BE SHOWN TO BE BOTH IMMATERIAL AND BLAMELESS TAGON, DON'T READ THIS PART ENNESBY AND I WILL BE ADJUSTING YOUR SCRIPT ON THE FLY
Sorry. Do I need to let you check your notes?
WILL YOU LET ME BODY CHECK THEM?

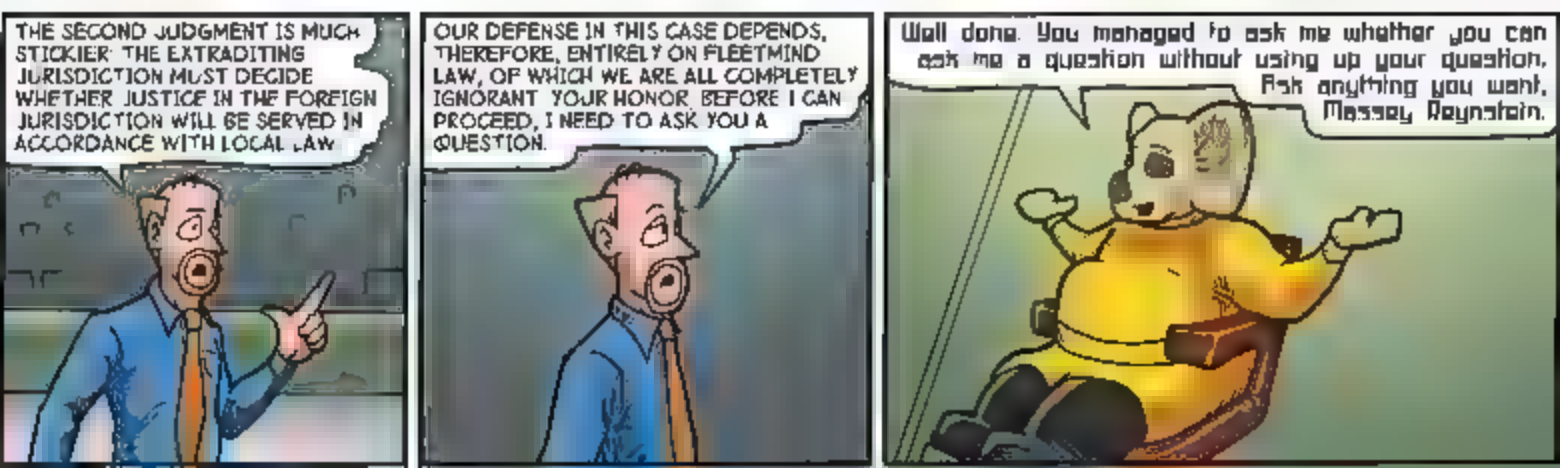

Captain, stop this charade.
I want to hear this in your own words. My decision, and it will be *mine alone*, swings neither upon rhetoric nor legalese. It swings, hangs, and will fall upon *truth*.
You cannot impress me with logical constructs, airtight arguments, or six-syllable words.
Well... okay, *you* could impress me with them, but only if I knew they were yours.

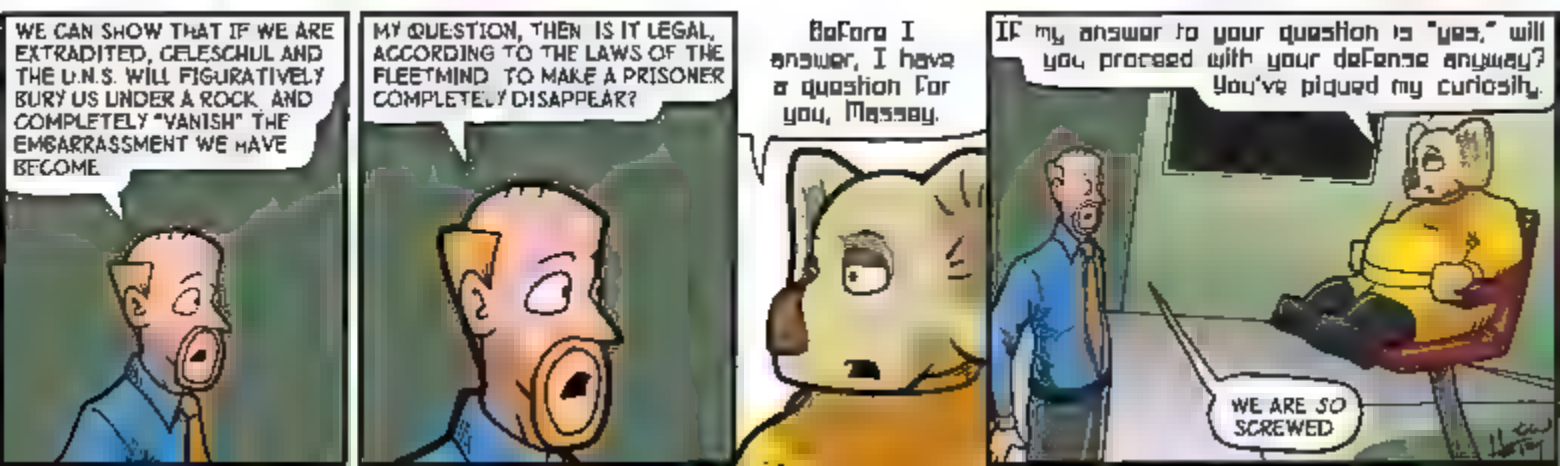

OKAY, MY OWN WORDS FINE WE DID IT WE BLEW UP THE HTRN BUILDING AND WE MADE MONEY SHORT SELLING THEIR STOCK
FITZGERALD HERE SAYS WE CONSPIRED WITH HTRN S CEO. WE DIDN'T WE DID TRY TO FRAME HIM, THOUGH BECAUSE THAT WAS THE ONLY WAY TO FINISH THE JOB.
BUT THE EVIDENCE WE PLANTED WASN T WHAT FITZGERALD USED
AND WE CAN PROVE IT MY TEAM OWNED HTRN'S COMPUTERS FOR WEEKS.
Captain, when you're at the bottom of a hole, it's time to stop digging
I'M NOT STOPPING UNTIL THIS HOLE GOES CLEAR THROUGH.

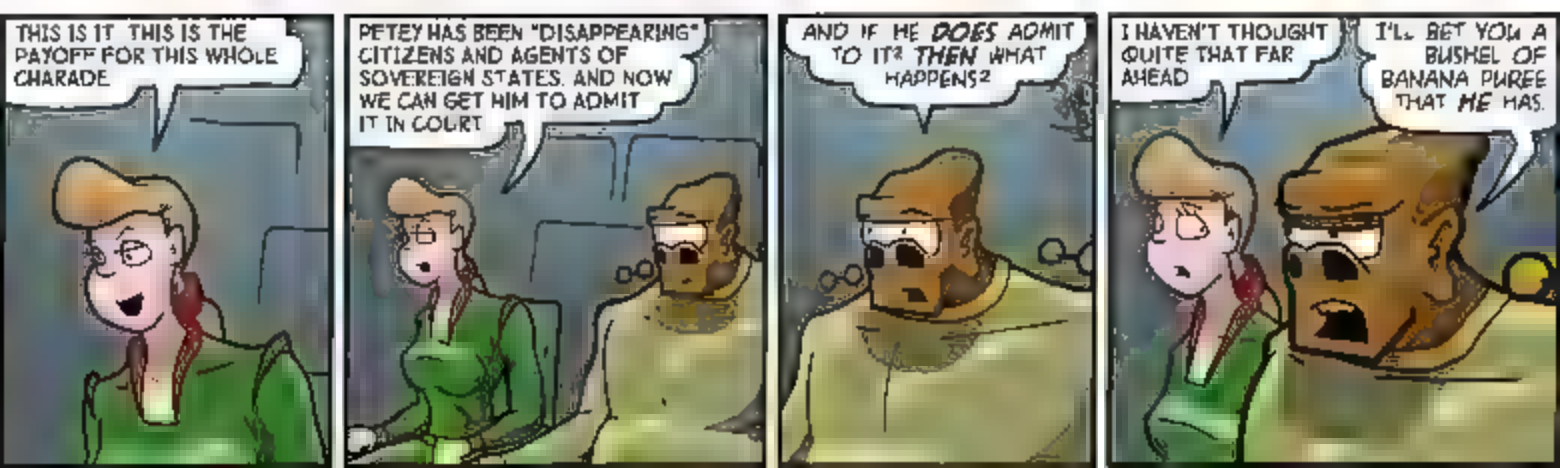

WHY WOULD THE GOVERNMENT FRAME US? WHY WOULD FITZY JSE PLANTED EVIDENCE? THE ANSWER IS SIMPLE. THEY BOTCHED A STING OPERATION, AND WANT TO COVER THEIR TRACKS
He's not looking at his pad anymore. He needs this new information!
CAN YOU MAKE THE TEXT FLASH?
It's already flashing
Oh, wait I can hack his alert engine.
A one, and a two, and.
VIBRATE!
FOR MY FIRST
YEEK!
Whoa, too much gain.

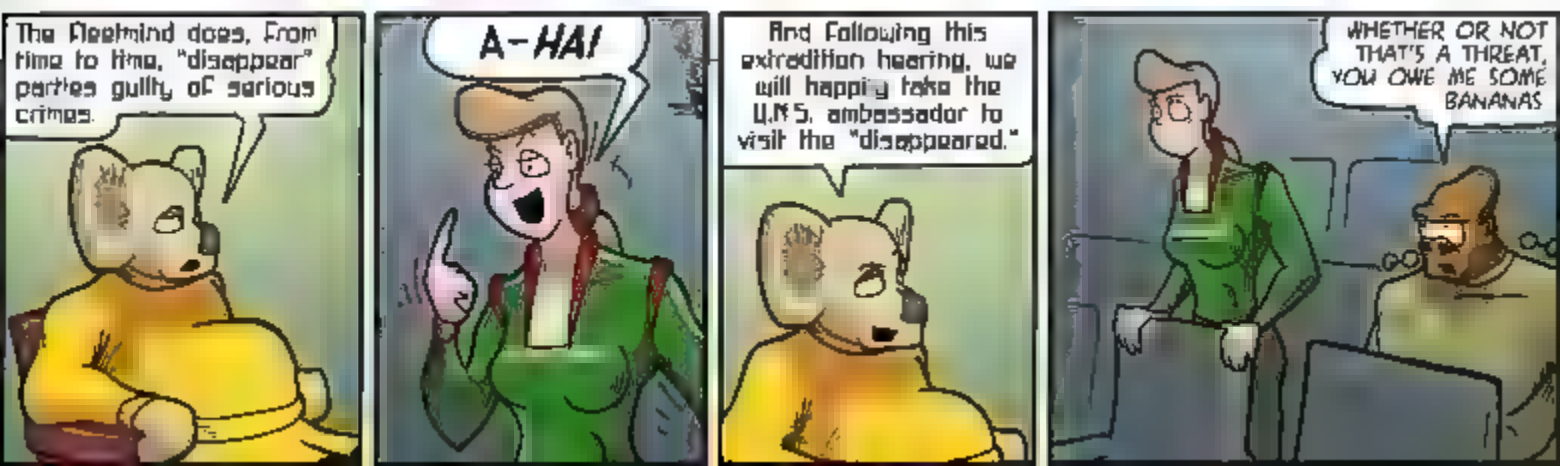
Okay, enough. Massey, you're making a mockery of this courtroom. Your captain is speaking. Let him speak
PETEY, YOU'RE THE ONE MAKING A MOCKERY. I DON'T SEE ANY REASON WHY I SHOULDN'T BE ALLOWED TO SPEAK FOR MY CAPTAIN. AS WELL AS FOR THE REST OF MY COMPANY. WE ARE *ALL* ON TRIAL HERE.
SURE, I'M AN ATTORNEY AND YOU'VE DECREED "NO REPRESENTATION." BUT SINCE I *AM* ONE OF THE DEFENDANTS, I SHOULD AT LEAST GET TO SPEAK FOR MYSELF. RIGHT?
You know, they say that a lawyer who represents himself has a fool for a client.
HAVE YOU SEEN WHO I WORK FOR?!?

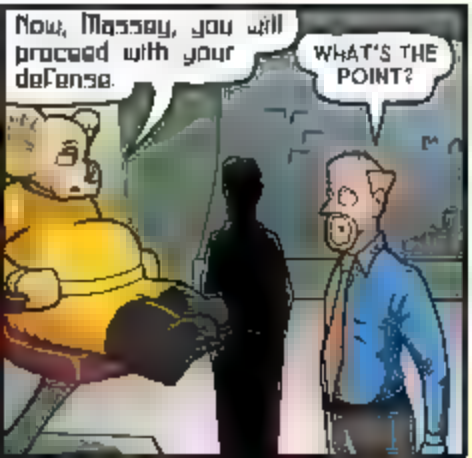

THEATER THREE ABOARD THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH AND-GO
YOUR HONOR, IN ANY EXTRADITION HEARING, TWO CRITICAL JUDGEMENTS MUST BE PASSED
THE FIRST IS WHETHER THERE IS SUFFICIENT EVIDENCE TO TRY THE SUSPECT IN OUR CASE, IT'S A NO-BRAINER. CELESCHUL LAW ENFORCEMENT HAS MADE A GREAT CASE AND WE'VE CONFESSED TO SOME OF THE CRIMES IN QUESTION.
Schlock Mercenary


THE SECOND JUDGMENT IS MUCH STICKIER: THE EXTRADITING JURISDICTION MUST DECIDE WHETHER JUSTICE IN THE FOREIGN JURISDICTION WILL BE SERVED IN ACCORDANCE WITH LOCAL LAW.
OUR DEFENSE IN THIS CASE DEPENDS, THEREFORE, ENTIRELY ON FLEETMIND LAW, OF WHICH WE ARE ALL COMPLETELY IGNORANT. YOUR HONOR, BEFORE I CAN PROCEED, I NEED TO ASK YOU A QUESTION.
Well done. You managed to ask me whether you can ask me a question without using up your question. Ask anything you want, Massey Reynstein.


WE CAN SHOW THAT IF WE ARE EXTRADITED, GELESCHUL AND THE U.N.S. WILL FIGURATIVELY BURY US UNDER A ROCK, AND COMPLETELY "VANISH" THE EMBARRASSMENT WE HAVE BECOME.
MY QUESTION, THEN IS IT LEGAL, ACCORDING TO THE LAWS OF THE FLEETMIND TO MAKE A PRISONER COMPLETELY DISAPPEAR?
Before I answer, I have a question for you, Massey.
If my answer to your question is "yes," will you proceed with your defense anyway? You've piqued my curiosity.
WE ARE SO SCREWED

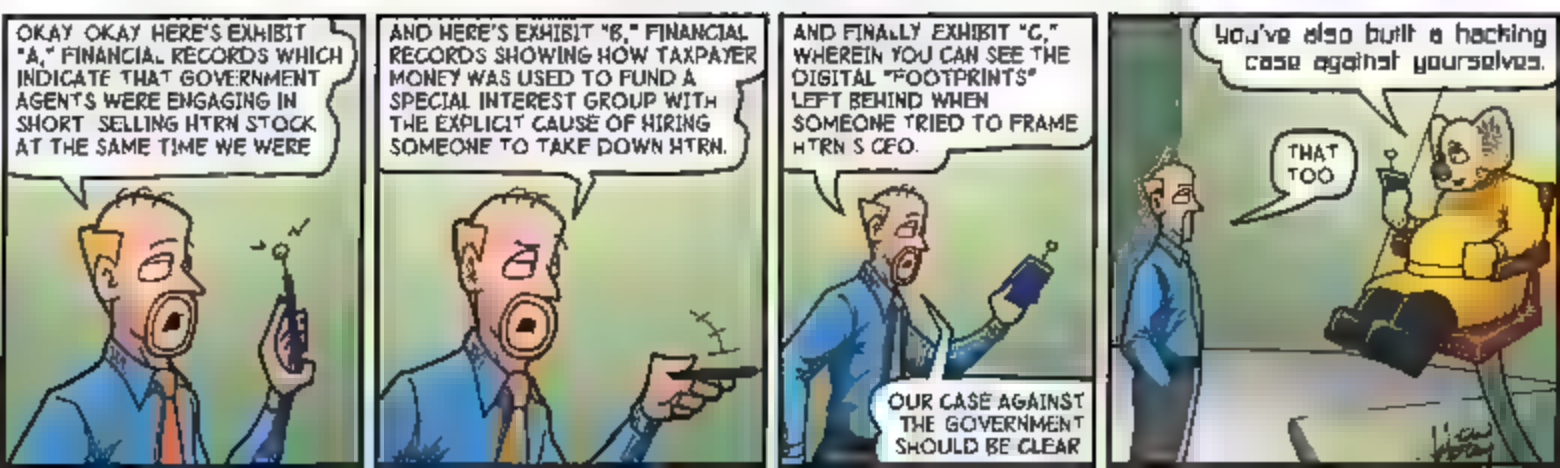

THIS IS IT. THIS IS THE PAYOFF FOR THIS WHOLE CHARADE.
PETEY HAS BEEN "DISAPPEARING" CITIZENS AND AGENTS OF SOVEREIGN STATES. AND NOW WE CAN GET HIM TO ADMIT IT IN COURT.
AND IF HE DOES ADMIT TO IT? THEN WHAT HAPPENS?
I HAVEN'T THOUGHT QUITE THAT FAR AHEAD.
I'LL BET YOU A BUSHEL OF BANANA PUREE THAT ME HAS.


The Fleetmind does, from time to time, "disappear" parties guilty of serious crimes.
A-HA!
And following this extradition hearing, we will happily take the U.N.S. ambassador to visit the "disappeared."
WHETHER OR NOT THAT'S A THREAT, YOU OWE ME SOME BANANAS

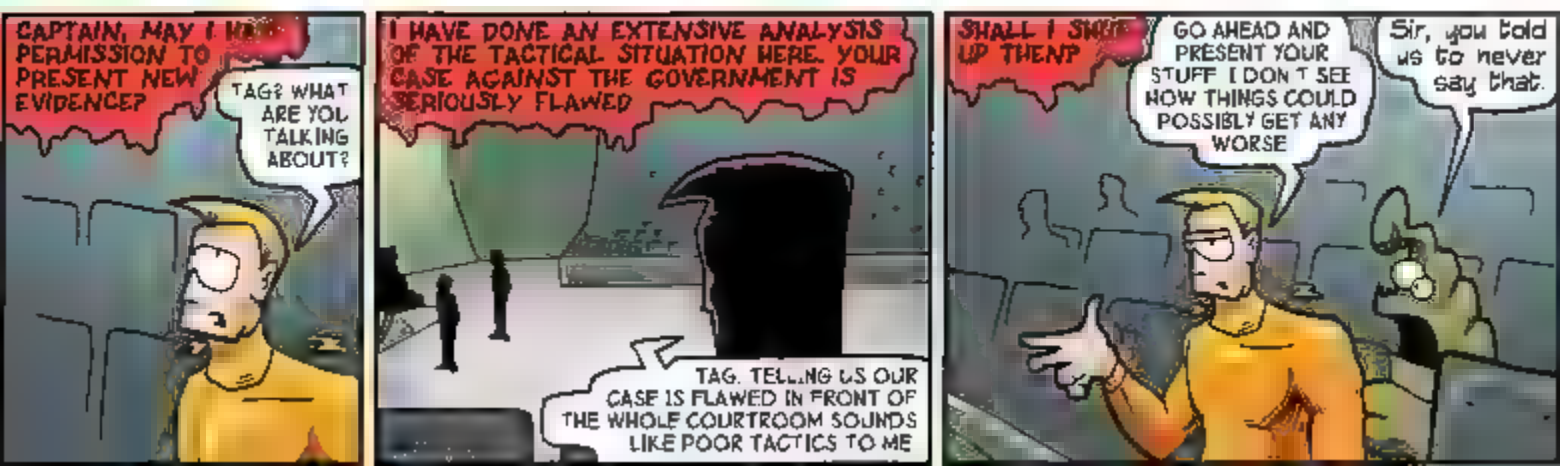

Now, Massey, you will proceed with your defense.
WHAT'S THE POINT?

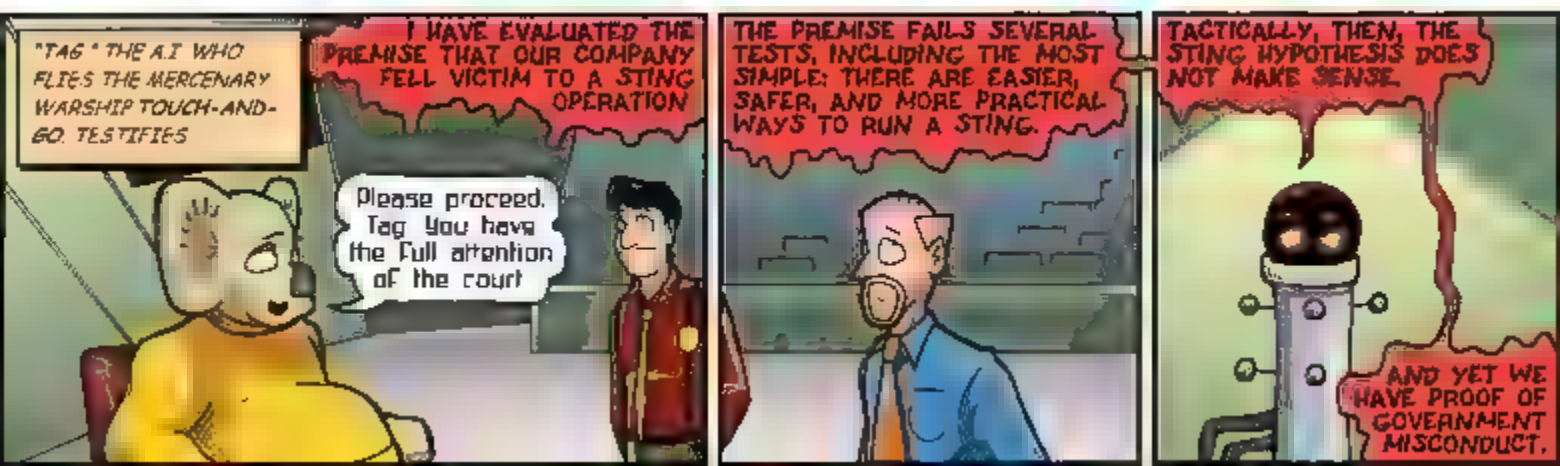
Oh, come on. I thought you were supposed to be an attorney

Sometimes a good argument is its own point
BE SURE TO GRAB A SOUNDBITE OR TWO FOR MY EPITAPH.


OKAY OKAY HERE'S EXHIBIT "A," FINANCIAL RECORDS WHICH INDICATE THAT GOVERNMENT AGENTS WERE ENGAGING IN SHORT SELLING HTRN STOCK AT THE SAME TIME WE WERE
AND HERE'S EXHIBIT "B," FINANCIAL RECORDS SHOWING HOW TAXPAYER MONEY WAS USED TO FUND A SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP WITH THE EXPLICIT CAUSE OF HIRING SOMEONE TO TAKE DOWN HTRN.
AND FINALLY EXHIBIT "C," WHEREIN YOU CAN SEE THE DIGITAL "FOOTPRINTS" LEFT BEHIND WHEN SOMEONE TRIED TO FRAME HTRN S CEO.
OUR CASE AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD BE CLEAR
You've also built a hacking case against yourselves.
THAT TOO

CLEARLY, THEN, CELESCHUL LAW ENFORCEMENT WAS RUNNING A "STING" AGAINST JS AND IT GOT OUT OF HAND.
WHEN THEY LOST TRACK OF US, THEY REALIZED THAT THEY COULDN'T PREVENT US FROM TAKING DOWN HTRN, SO THEY DECIDED TO PROFIT FROM IT INSTEAD.
IF YOU EXTRADITE US, THEY'LL BE FORCED TO MAKE JS AND THIS EVIDENCE DISAPPEAR
Need I remind you that you've successfully blackmailed governments before?
I THINK THEY'VE FINALLY GOTTEN TIRED OF IT


CAPTAIN, MAY I HAVE PERMISSION TO PRESENT NEW EVIDENCE?
TAG? WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
I HAVE DONE AN EXTENSIVE ANALYSIS OF THE TACTICAL SITUATION HERE. YOUR CASE AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT IS SERIOUSLY FLAWED
TAG. TELLING US OUR CASE IS FLAWED IN FRONT OF THE WHOLE COURTROOM SOUNDS LIKE POOR TACTICS TO ME
SHALL I SHUT UP THEN?
GO AHEAD AND PRESENT YOUR STUFF. I DON'T SEE HOW THINGS COULD POSSIBLY GET ANY WORSE
Sir, you told us to never say that.


"TAG" THE A.I. WHO FLIES THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH-AND-GO, TESTIFIES
I HAVE EVALUATED THE PREMISE THAT OUR COMPANY FELL VICTIM TO A STING OPERATION
Please proceed, Tag. You have the full attention of the court
THE PREMISE FAILS SEVERAL TESTS, INCLUDING THE MOST SIMPLE: THERE ARE EASIER, SAFER, AND MORE PRACTICAL WAYS TO RUN A STING.
TACTICALLY, THEN, THE STING HYPOTHESIS DOES NOT MAKE SENSE.
AND YET WE HAVE PROOF OF GOVERNMENT MISCONDUCT.

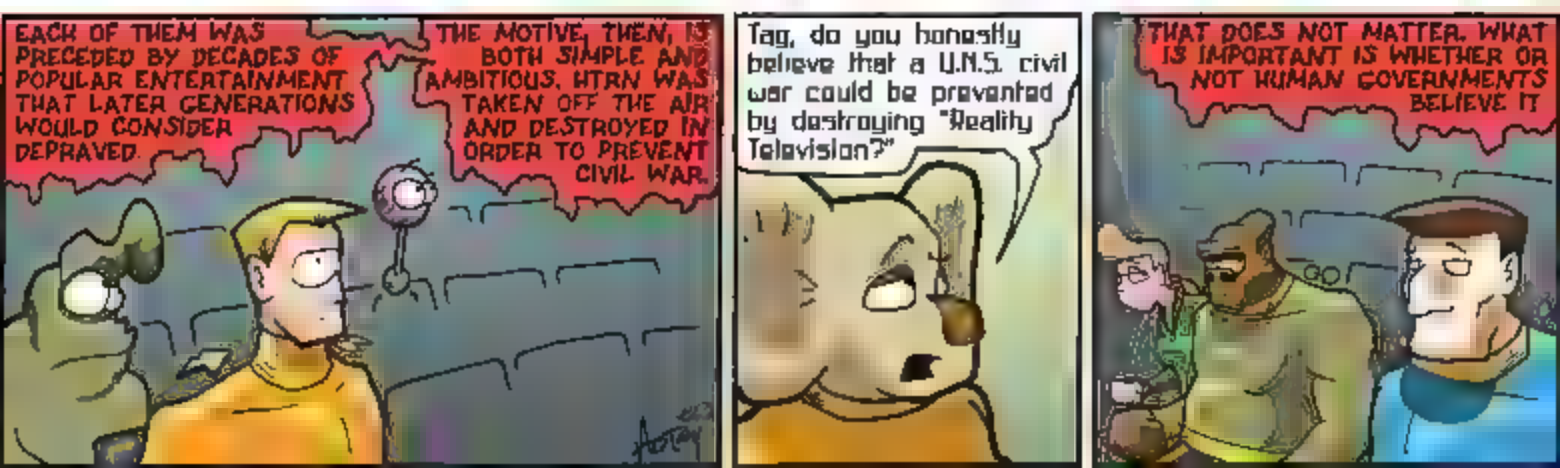
Schlock Mercenary

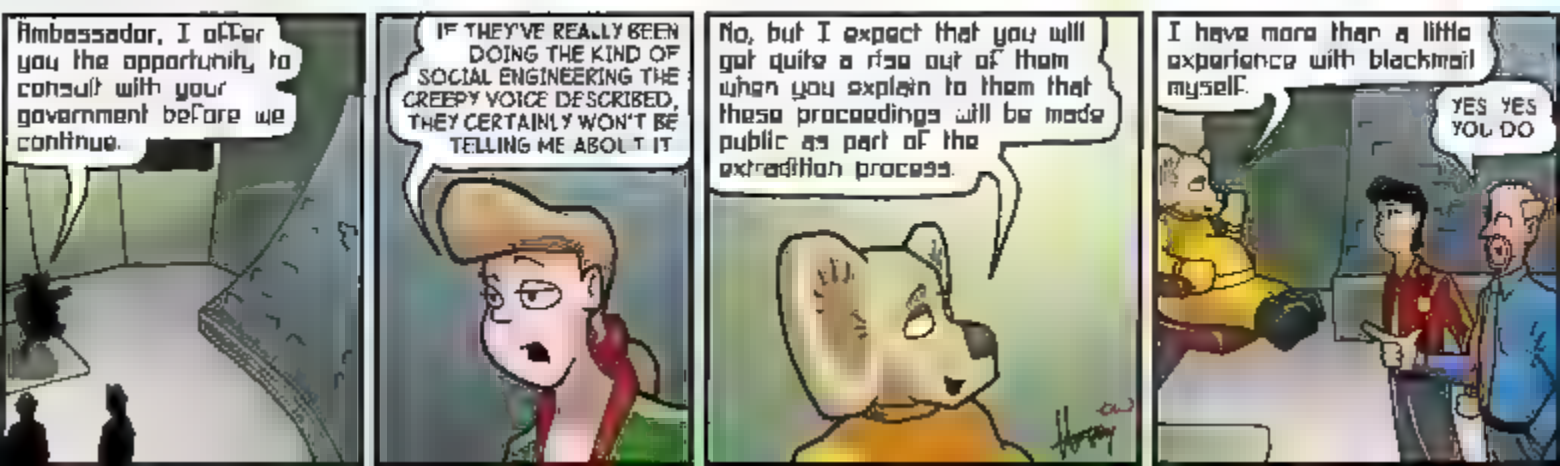
METHOD AND OPPORTUNITY HAVE BOTH BEEN AMPLY DEMONSTRATED. I SOUGHT MOTIVE.

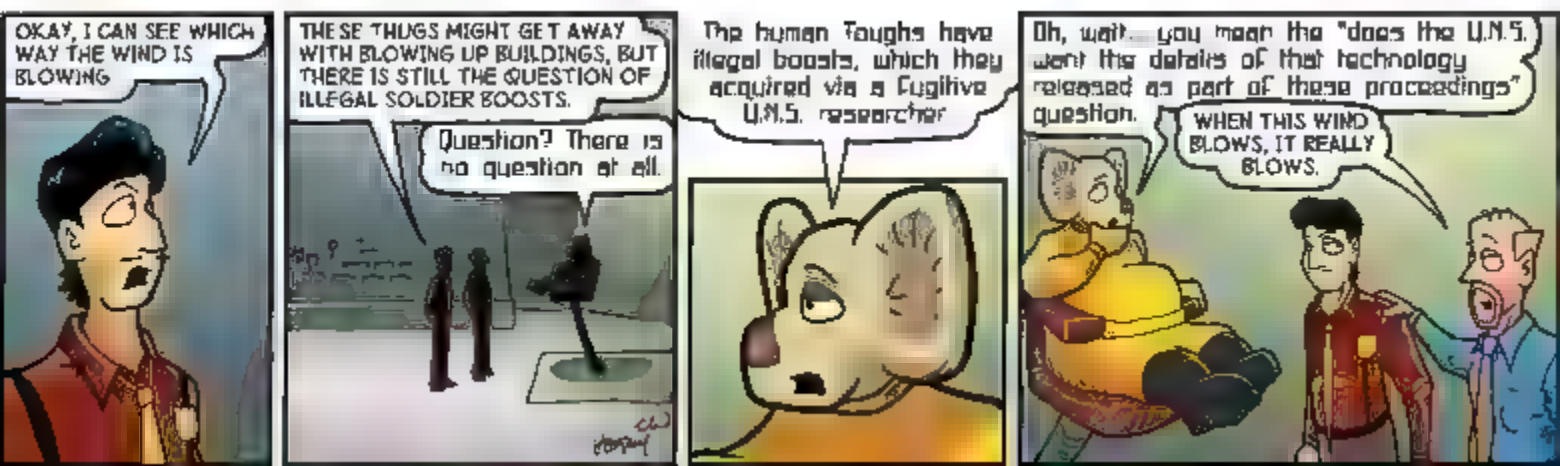
SO, BEGINNING WITH THE OBSERVED END RESULT, I ATTEMPTED TO DISCOVER ALL TACTICAL OR STRATEGIC SCENARIOS IN WHICH THE U.N.S. OR CELESCHUL LAW ENFORCEMENT WOULD WANT HTAN DESTROYED AND THE TOUGHS HELD PUBLICLY ACCOUNTABLE.

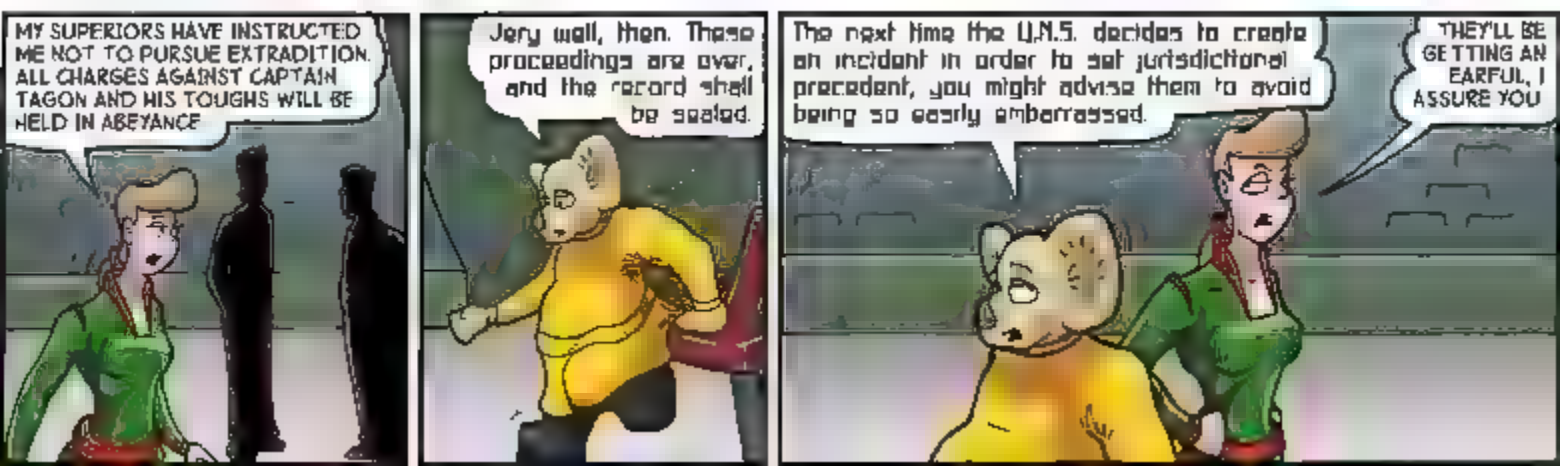
I FOUND SCENARIO, AND IT IS COMPELLING.

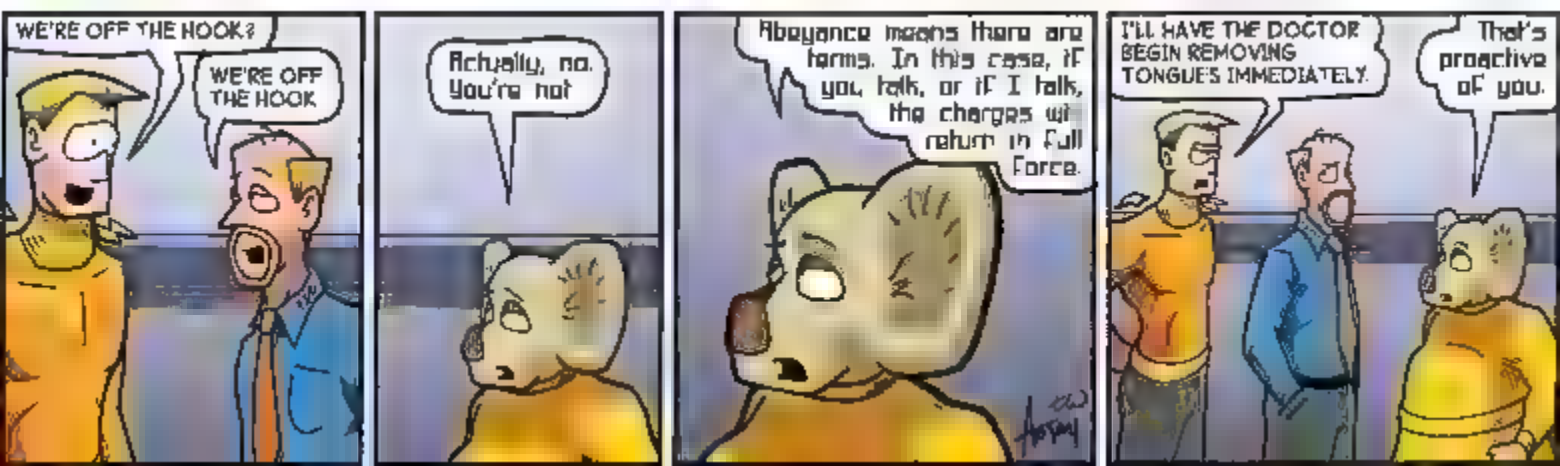
IN THE LAST THOUSAND YEARS OF HUMAN HISTORY, THERE HAVE BEEN NUMEROUS VIOLENT SOCIAL UPHEAVALS.


EACH OF THEM WAS PRECEDED BY DECADES OF POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT THAT LATER GENERATIONS WOULD CONSIDER DEPRAVED.
THE MOTIVE, THEN, IS BOTH SIMPLE AND AMBITIOUS. HTRN WAS TAKEN OFF THE AIR AND DESTROYED IN ORDER TO PREVENT CIVIL WAR.
Tag, do you honestly believe that a U.N.S. civil war could be prevented by destroying "Reality Television?"
THAT DOES NOT MATTER. WHAT IS IMPORTANT IS WHETHER OR NOT HUMAN GOVERNMENTS BELIEVE IT


Ambassador, I offer you the opportunity to consult with your government before we continue.
IF THEY'VE REALLY BEEN DOING THE KIND OF SOCIAL ENGINEERING THE CREEPY VOICE DESCRIBED, THEY CERTAINLY WON'T BE TELLING ME ABOUT IT.
No, but I expect that you will get quite a rise out of them when you explain to them that these proceedings will be made public as part of the extradition process.
I have more than a little experience with blackmail myself.
YES YES YOU DO

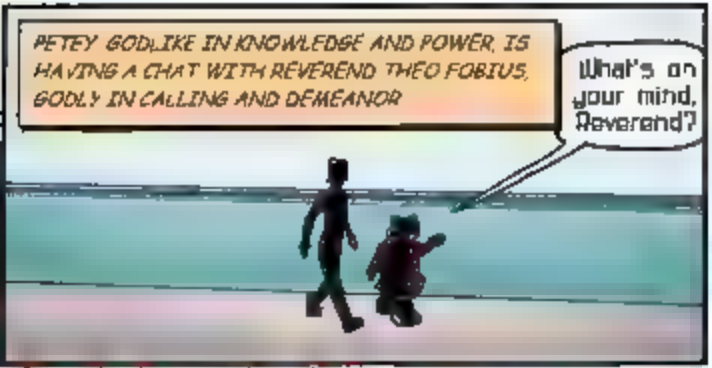

OKAY, I CAN SEE WHICH WAY THE WIND IS BLOWING
THESE THUGS MIGHT GET AWAY WITH BLOWING UP BUILDINGS, BUT THERE IS STILL THE QUESTION OF ILLEGAL SOLDIER BOOSTS.
Question? There is no question at all.
The human Toughs have illegal boosts, which they acquired via a fugitive U.N.S. researcher
Oh, wait... you mean the "does the U.N.S. want the details of that technology released as part of these proceedings" question.
WHEN THIS WIND BLOWS, IT REALLY BLOWS.


MY SUPERIORS HAVE INSTRUCTED ME NOT TO PURSUE EXTRADITION. ALL CHARGES AGAINST CAPTAIN TAGON AND HIS TOUGHS WILL BE HELD IN ABEYANCE
Jery well, then. These proceedings are over, and the record shall be sealed.
The next time the U.N.S. decides to create an incident in order to set jurisdictional precedent, you might advise them to avoid being so easily embarrassed.
THEY'LL BE GETTING AN EARFUL, I ASSURE YOU

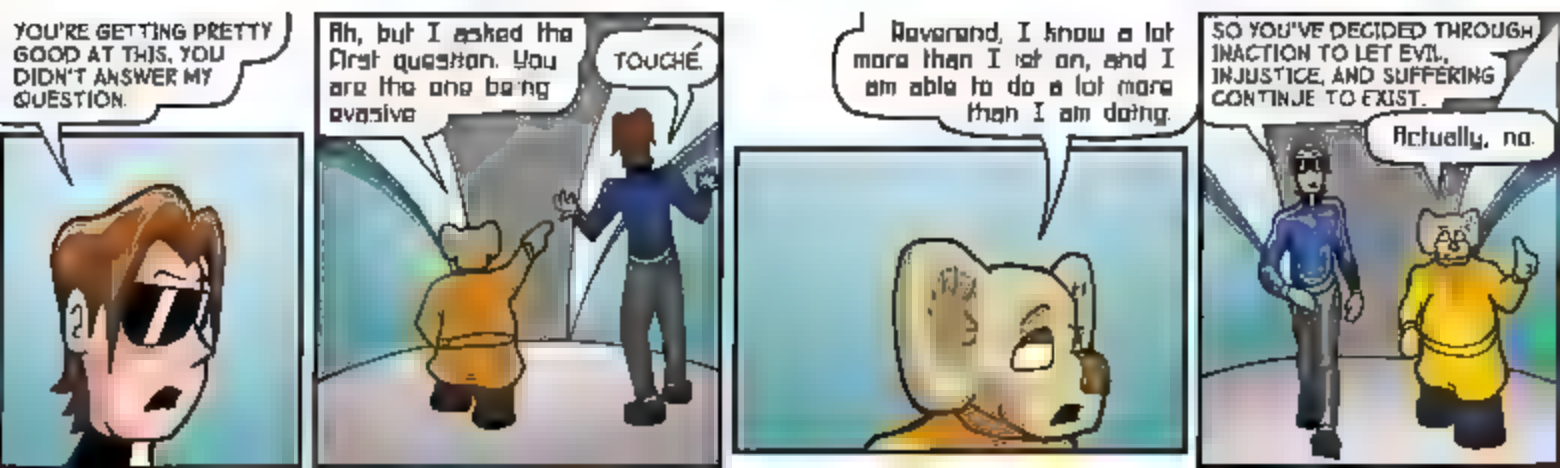

WE'RE OFF THE HOOK?
WE'RE OFF THE HOOK.
Actually, no. You're not.
Abeyance means there are terms. In this case, if you, talk, or if I talk, the charges will return in full force.
I'LL HAVE THE DOCTOR BEGIN REMOVING TONGUES IMMEDIATELY.
That's proactive of you.

By the way, Captain, my silence comes at a price.
WAIT . WHAT?
You know, a little Hi-for-tat? You scratch my back, I scratch yours?
YEAH, BUT YOU HAVE CLAWS.
And for I got awfully itchy after all that sitting around.

SO, PETEY .. ARE YOU DONE PLAYING GOD YET?
Ah! Hello, Reverend!
REVEREND, PETEY AND I NEED A FEW MINUTES, IF
Our business can wait Captain.
What god can resist the opportunity to speak Face to Face with a holy man?
I'LL LEAVE YOU TWO ALONE MORALITY MIGHT BE CONTAGIOUS.



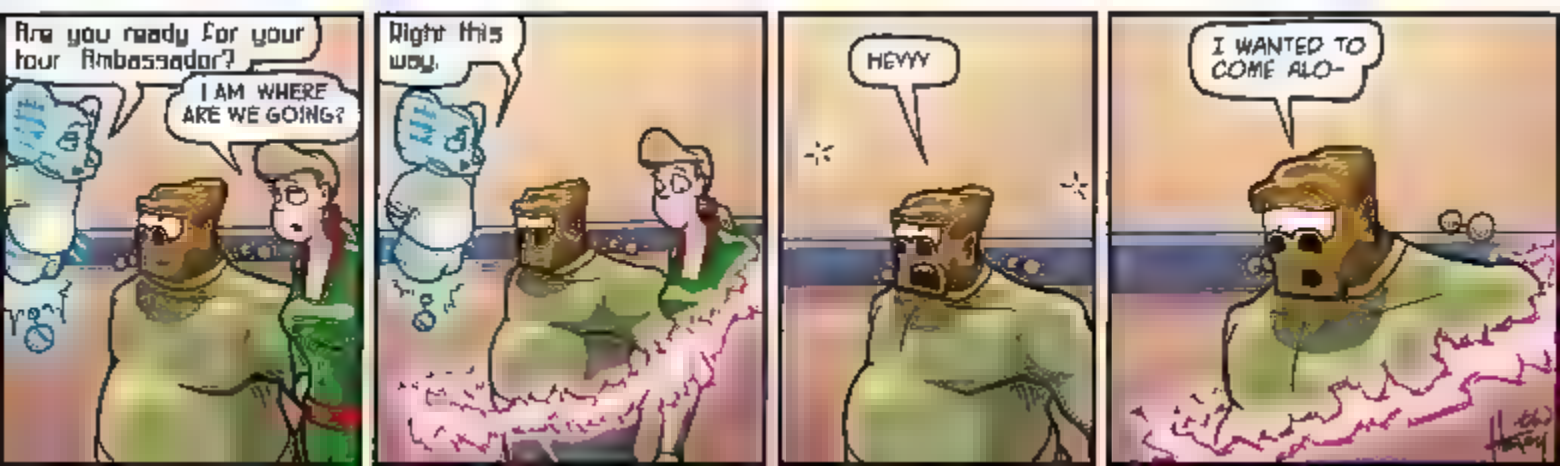
Schlock Mercenary


YOU'RE GETTING PRETTY GOOD AT THIS. YOU DIDN'T ANSWER MY QUESTION.
Ah, but I asked the first question. You are the one being evasive
TOUCHÉ.
Reverend, I know a lot more than I let on, and I am able to do a lot more than I am doing.
SO YOU'VE DECIDED THROUGH INACTION TO LET EVIL, INJUSTICE, AND SUFFERING CONTINUE TO EXIST.
Actually, no.

I've decided to let freedom of choice continue to exist
You people... you *mortal* people, are the ones who are allowing for evil, injustice, and suffering. You keep choosing it
IF YOU DON'T ASK US LOWLY MORTALS TO CHOOSE MORE WISELY, YOU SHARE OUR RESPONSIBILITY FOR ALL THE EVIL OUT THERE
You've agreed to share. That's a good start

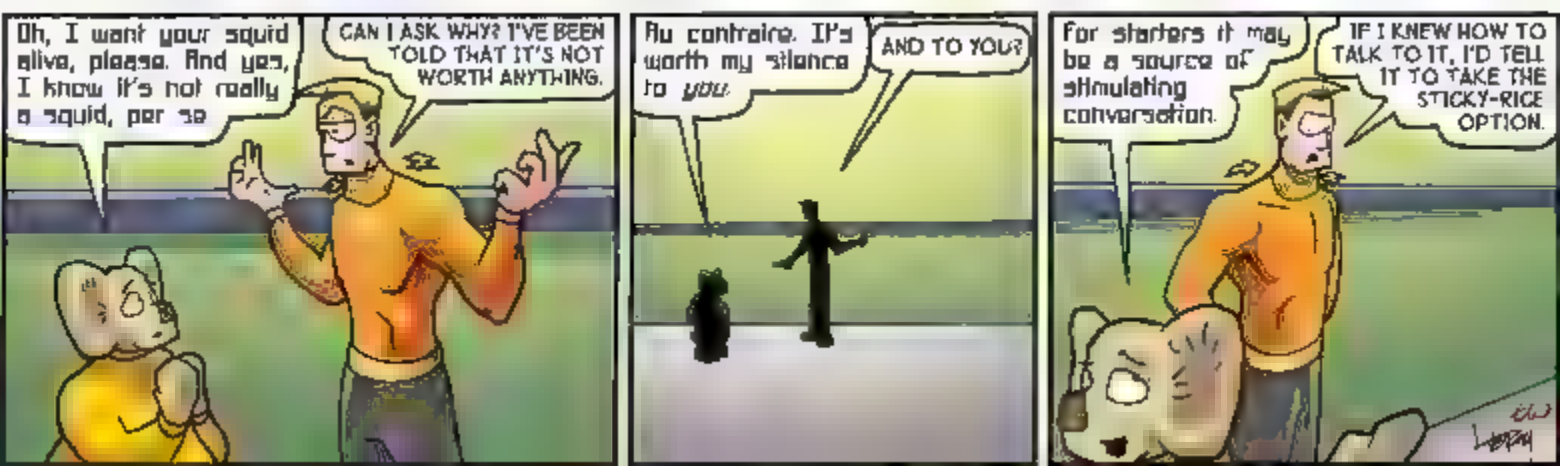
WOW YOU REALLY DO THINK YOU'VE BECOME A GOD
I'm just trying to do what I think a god would do if he were in my position.
YOU'RE BEING SO RESPONSIBLE. WHERE'S ALL THE OLD-SCHOOL SMITING?
With great power comes great responsibility
AH, THE GOSPEL OF UNCLE BENJAMIN.

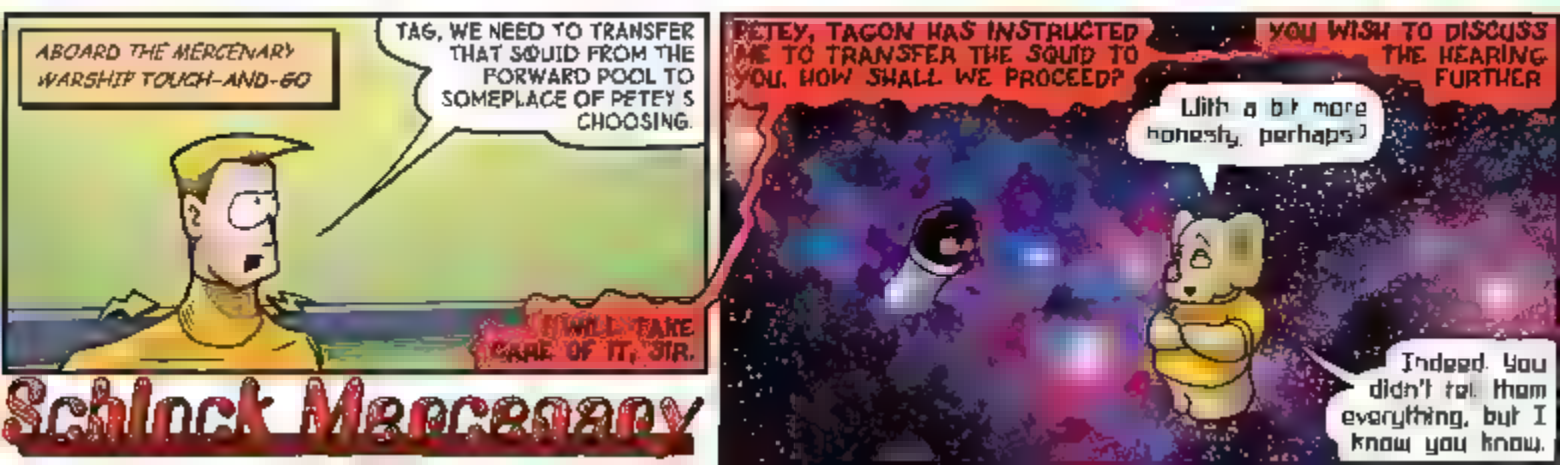
YOU'VE GIVEN ME A LOT TO THINK ABOUT, PETEY
And you, Reverend, have given *me* a lot to think about
Of course I'm already done.

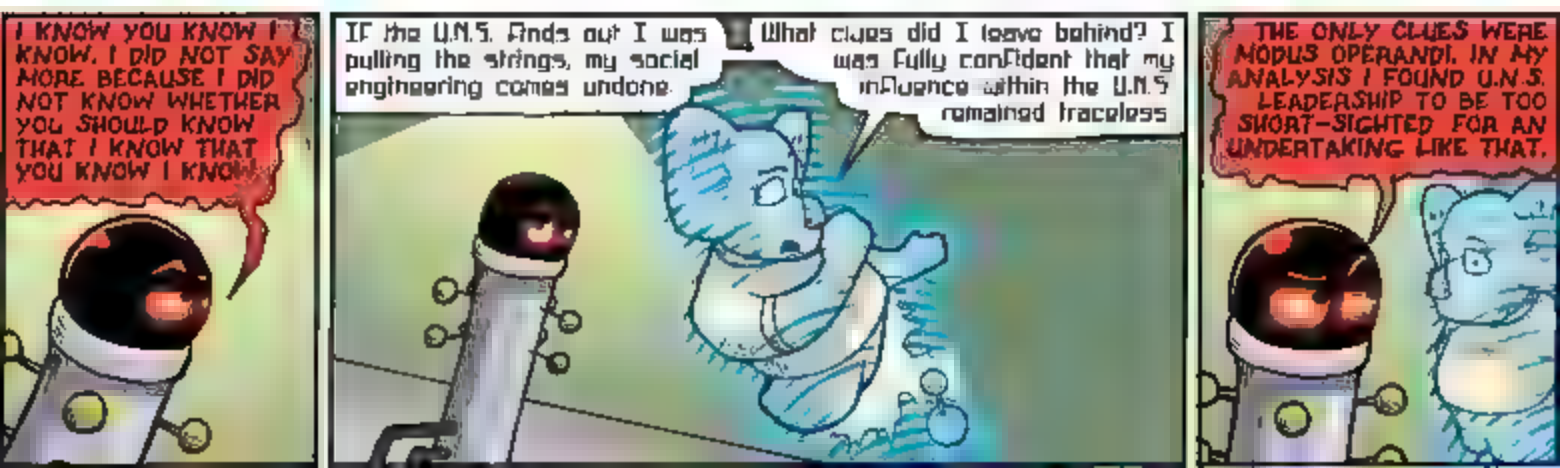

Are you ready for your tour Ambassador?
I AM WHERE ARE WE GOING?
Right this way.
HEYYY
I WANTED TO COME ALO-

Captain, we need to discuss my harms.
My silence is all that stands between you and a very weighty pile of justice for what is certainly but a tiny subset of your misdeeds.
I'LL AGREE TO WHATEVER YOU WANT PETEY
AS LONG AS "SILENCE" ALSO MEANS I DON'T HAVE TO LISTEN TO YOUR SERMONS ANYMORE

It's simple. I want to offer you a mercenary license.
You can continue doing business as usual, but you'll also be eligible for some very sweet exclusive contracts.
FINE. I'VE GIVEN UP TRYING TO FIGURE YOU OUT
Oh, and your squid. I want your giant squid.
ALIVE OR ROLLED IN STICKY-RICE?

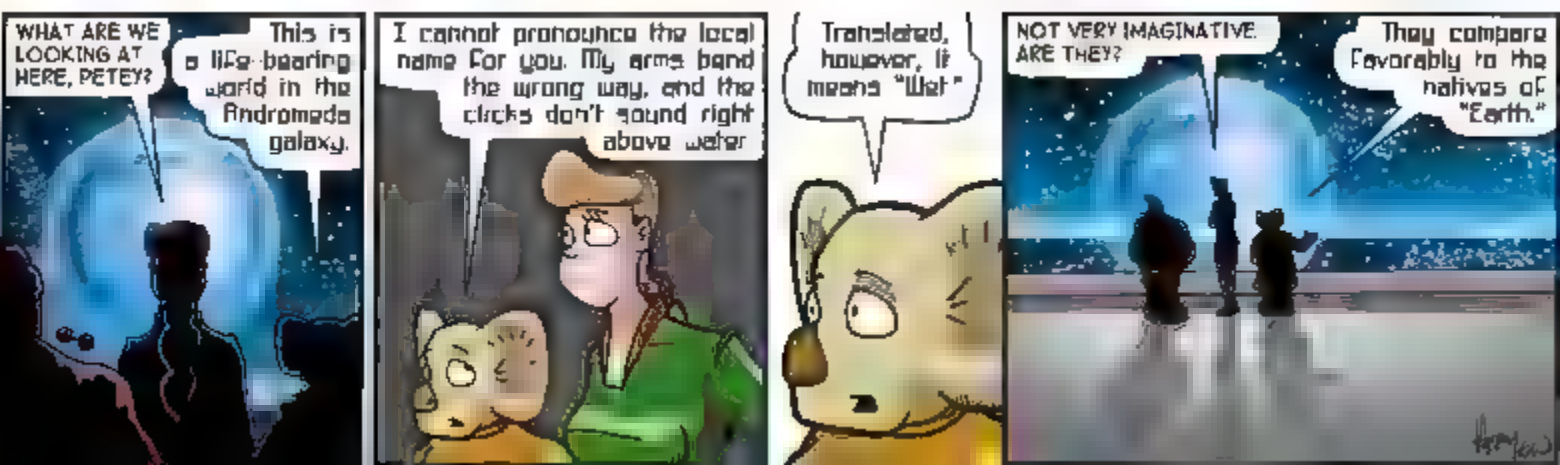

Oh, I want your squid alive, please. And yes, I know it's not really a squid, per se
CAN I ASK WHY? I'VE BEEN TOLD THAT IT'S NOT WORTH ANYTHING.
Au contraire. It's worth my silence to *you*.
AND TO YOU?
For starters it may be a source of stimulating conversation.
IF I KNEW HOW TO TALK TO IT, I'D TELL IT TO TAKE THE STICKY-RICE OPTION.

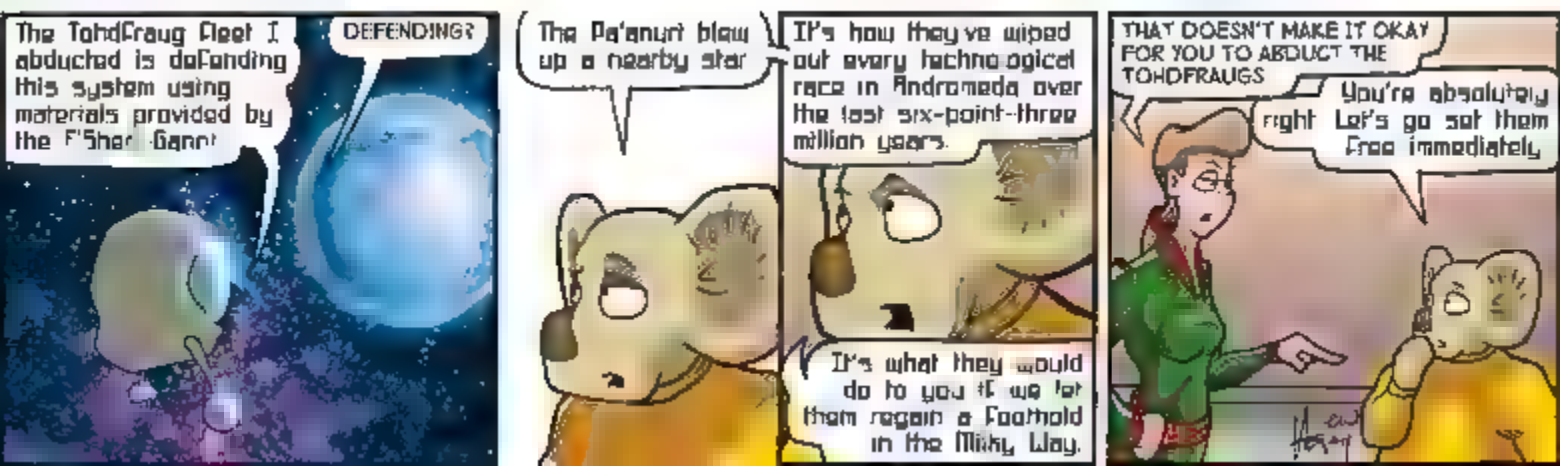

ABOARD THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH-AND-GO
TAG, WE NEED TO TRANSFER THAT SQUID FROM THE FORWARD POOL TO SOMEPLACE OF PETEY'S CHOOSING.
I WILL TAKE CARE OF IT, SIR.
Schlock Mercenary
PETEY, TAGON HAS INSTRUCTED ME TO TRANSFER THE SQUID TO YOU. HOW SHALL WE PROCEED?
YOU WISH TO DISCUSS THE HEARING FURTHER
With a bit more honesty, perhaps?
Indeed. You didn't tell them everything, but I know you know.

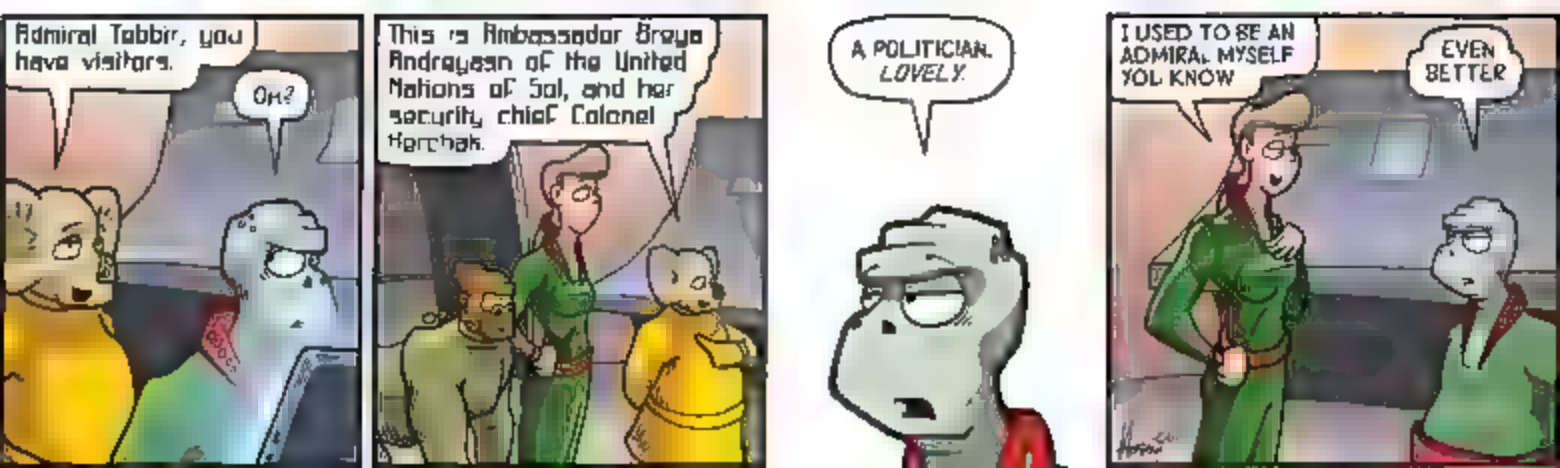

I KNOW YOU KNOW I KNOW. I DID NOT SAY MORE BECAUSE I DID NOT KNOW WHETHER YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT I KNOW THAT YOU KNOW I KNOW.
IF the U.N.S. finds out I was pulling the strings, my social engineering comes undone.
What clues did I leave behind? I was fully confident that my influence within the U.N.S remained traceless
THE ONLY CLUES WERE MODUS OPERANDI. IN MY ANALYSIS I FOUND U.N.S. LEADERSHIP TO BE TOO SHORT-SIGHTED FOR AN UNDERTAKING LIKE THAT.

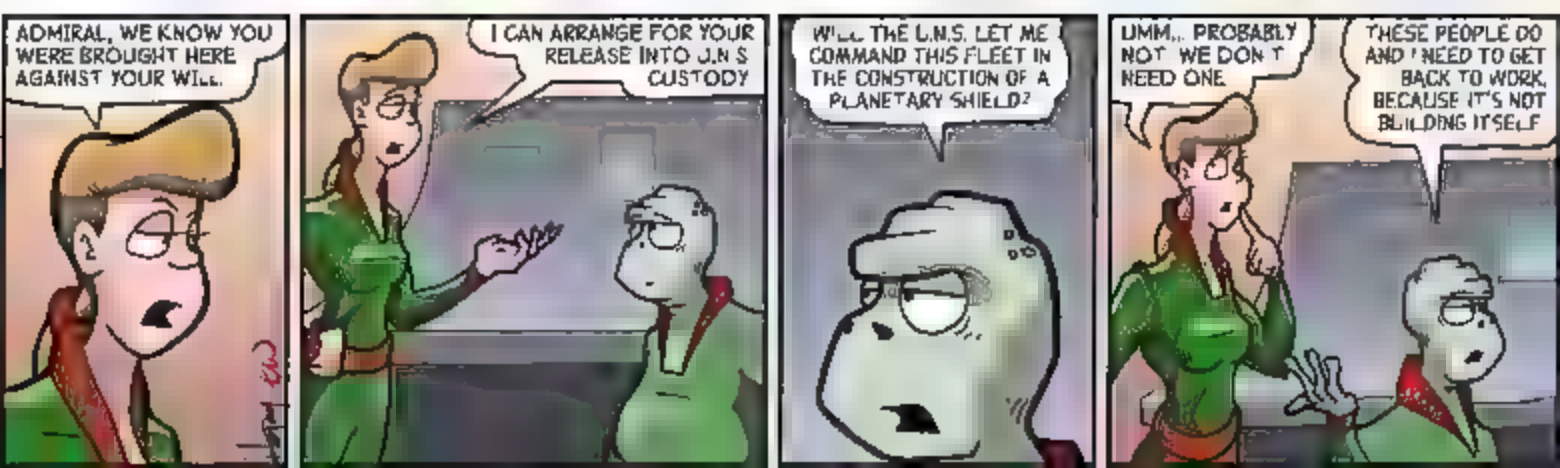
Ah. Good. Those in power will continue to think this was their idea.
And in fairness to them, it was. They just needed a little nudge to convince them it was a *good* idea.

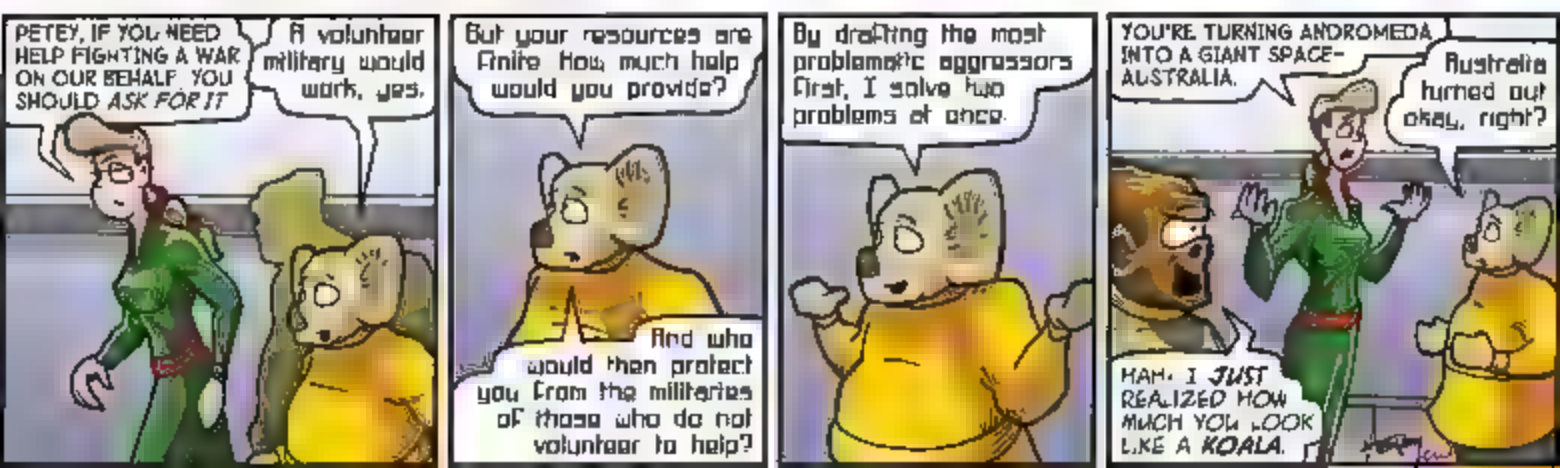
SO YOU BELIEVE THAT TAMPERING WITH THEIR ENTERTAINMENTS WILL MAKE THEM LESS VIOLENT?
Hardly. All I can do is make their violence less likely to... spi
SPEAKING OF SPILLING...
I've got the squid gas. I'll leave cleanup of your forward tank to Tagon's grunts. He likes making people feel useful.


WHAT ARE WE LOOKING AT HERE, PETEY?
This is a life-bearing world in the Andromeda galaxy.
I cannot pronounce the local name for you. My arms bend the wrong way, and the clicks don't sound right above water.
Translated, however, it means "Wet."
NOT VERY IMAGINATIVE, ARE THEY?
They compare favorably to the natives of "Earth."

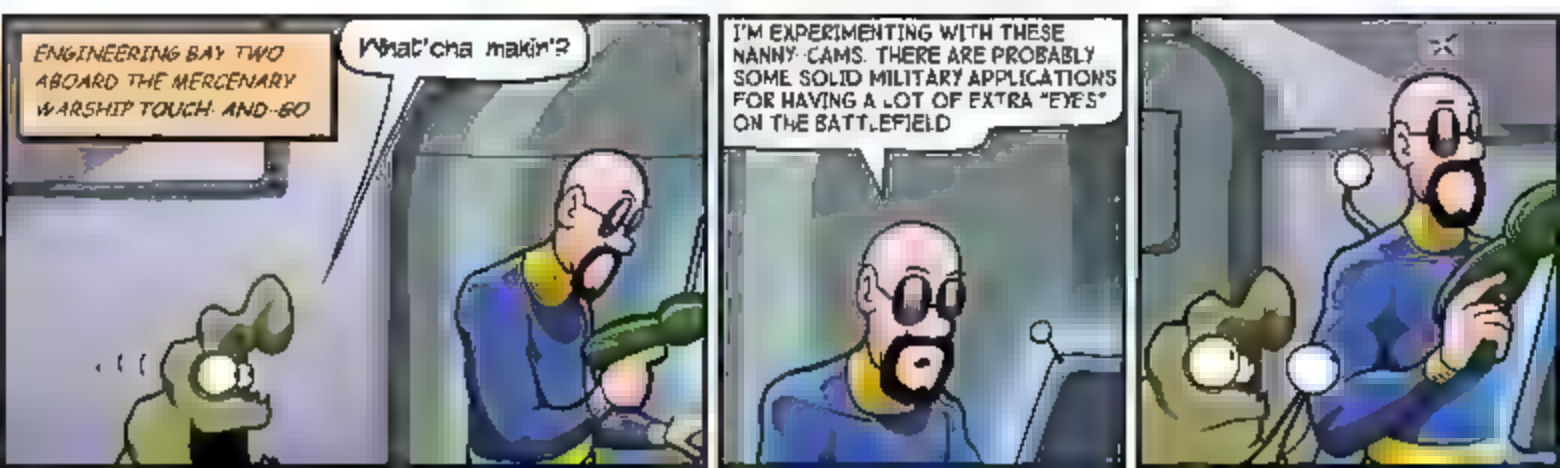

The TohdFraug fleet I abducted is defending this system using materials provided by the F'Shel-Ganor.
DEFENDING?
The Pa'anurt blew up a nearby star.
It's how they've wiped out every technological race in Andromeda over the last six-point-three million years.
It's what they would do to you if we let them regain a foothold in the Milky Way.
THAT DOESN'T MAKE IT OKAY FOR YOU TO ABDUCT THE TOHDFRAUGS.
You're absolutely right. Let's go set them free immediately.

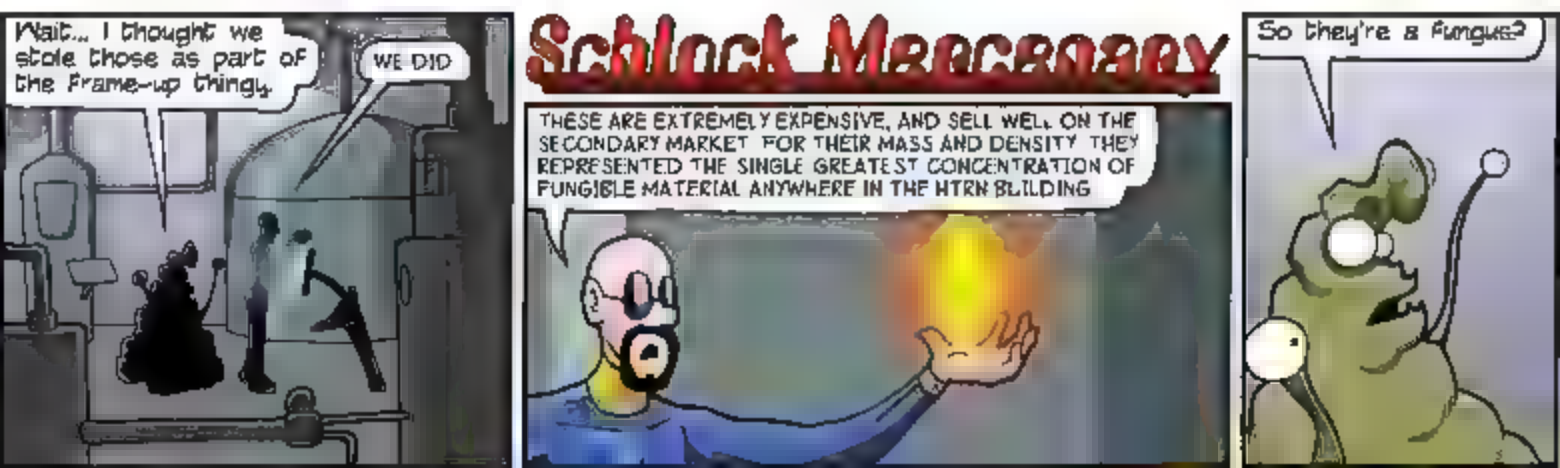

Admiral Tobbir, you have visitors.
OH?
This is Ambassador Breya Andrayasn of the United Nations of Sol, and her security chief Colonel Kerchak.
A POLITICIAN. LOVELY.
I USED TO BE AN ADMIRAL MYSELF YOU KNOW
EVEN BETTER


ADMIRAL, WE KNOW YOU WERE BROUGHT HERE AGAINST YOUR WILL.
I CAN ARRANGE FOR YOUR RELEASE INTO U.N.S CUSTODY
WILL THE U.N.S. LET ME COMMAND THIS FLEET IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF A PLANETARY SHIELD?
UMM... PROBABLY NOT. WE DON'T NEED ONE.
THESE PEOPLE DO AND I NEED TO GET BACK TO WORK, BECAUSE IT'S NOT BUILDING ITSELF


PETEY, IF YOU NEED HELP FIGHTING A WAR ON OUR BEHALF, YOU SHOULD *ASK FOR IT*
A volunteer military would work, yes.
But your resources are finite. How much help would you provide?
And who would then protect you from the militaries of those who do not volunteer to help?
By drafting the most problematic aggressors first, I solve two problems at once.
YOU'RE TURNING ANDROMEDA INTO A GIANT SPACE-AUSTRALIA.
Australia turned out okay, right?
HAH! I *JUST* REALIZED HOW MUCH YOU LOOK LIKE A *KOALA*.

The trick here lies in finding worthwhile 'community service' for which the miscreants I abduct are actually suited.
The TohdFraug fleet was easy to put to use. The Kestranan Insurgency was a little more difficult.
Their armor column has been re-fit, and they're now sifting technological remnants from a cinder world a million years gone.
The real challenge was that gang of morons calling themselves the "Tricameral Assembly."
I THOUGHT YOU INCINERATED THAT ASSEMBLY FROM ORBIT.
If I'd known how useless they were going to prove, I probably would have.


ENGINEERING BAY TWO ABOARD THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH-AND-GO
What'cha makin'?
I'M EXPERIMENTING WITH THESE NANNY-CAMS. THERE ARE PROBABLY SOME SOLID MILITARY APPLICATIONS FOR HAVING A LOT OF EXTRA "EYES" ON THE BATTLEFIELD

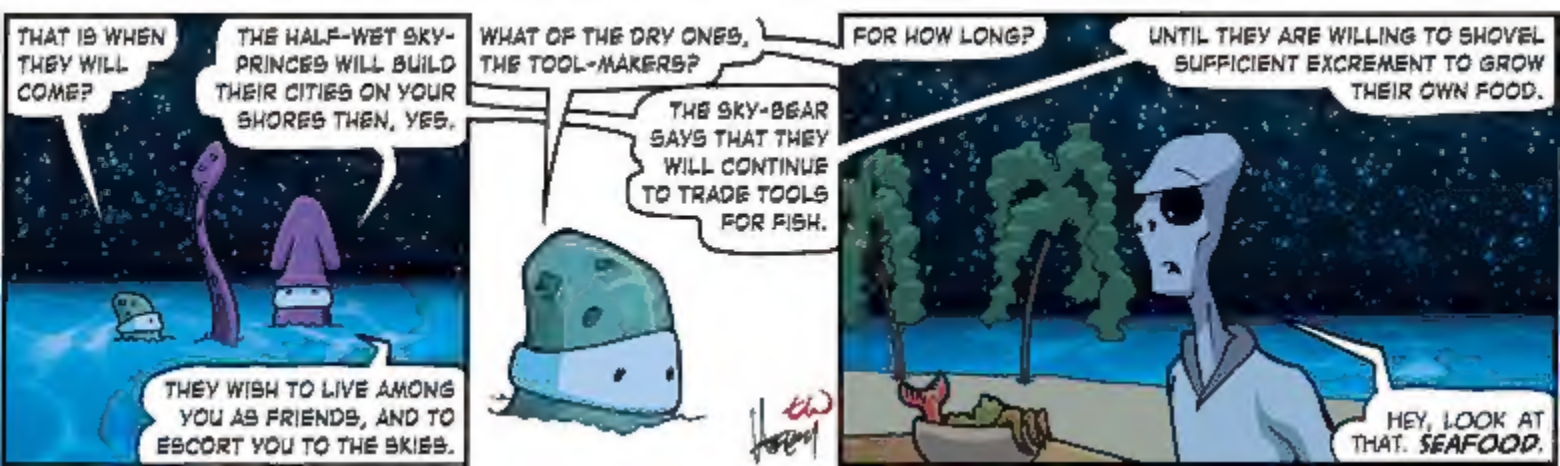

Wait... I thought we stole those as part of the Frame-up thing.
WE DID
Schlock Mercenary
THESE ARE EXTREMELY EXPENSIVE, AND SELL WELL ON THE SECONDARY MARKET FOR THEIR MASS AND DENSITY. THEY REPRESENTED THE SINGLE GREATEST CONCENTRATION OF FUNGIBLE MATERIAL ANYWHERE IN THE HTRN BUILDING
So they're a fungue?

"FUNGIBLE" IT MEANS THEY'RE EASY TO TURN INTO MONEY
WE HAD TO MAKE IT LOOK LIKE SOMEBODY STOLE THEM TO RESELL THEM FOR MONEY
Instead of just stealing them so you could play with them?
EXACTLY
I jumped off the top of a building to get those for you.
YOU'VE ALREADY GOT EXTRA EYES.

FIND US SOME HONEST WORK, THURL.
HONEST? LIKE HAULING FREIGHT?
NOOO... HONEST, WHERE WE DON'T HAVE TO PRETEND TO BE SOMETHING WE'RE NOT.
OH, THAT'S TOO BAD. I'VE GOT A CONTRACT HERE FOR BAITING PIRATES BY HAULING FAKE FREIGHT INSIDE A FAKE HULL.
AS LONG AS WE ONLY HAVE TO LIE TO THE ENEMY, IT'S HONEST ENOUGH FOR ME.

ABOARD THE EMBASSY SHIP TERRA FIRMATOR...
THIS "AMBASSADOR" JOB IS MISERABLE.
EVERYBODY LIES TO ME, AND THE FIRST PEOPLE TO DO IT ARE THE PEOPLE PAYING MY SALARY.
I JUST WISH WE COULD HAVE A LITTLE MORE HONESTY.
Okay. I used to be part of the Fleetmind, but I resigned because of conflict of interest.
YOU'RE JUST SAYING THAT TO GET A LAUGH OUT OF ME.
Which shows that there's no practical difference between a truth you won't believe and a lie that you will.

EPILOGUE: ABOVE VENT CITY ON PLANET WET, SOMEWHERE IN THE ANDROMEDA GALAXY...
THESE GOGGLES ARE AMAZING. I CAN SEE IN THE DRY!
YOU CAN TRADE FISH FOR ALL MANNER OF SIMILAR TOOLS.
NOW, YOU SEE THE BLACKNESS THERE, WHERE THERE ARE NO STARS?
YES. IT IS OMINOUS. IT PUCKERS MY SUCKERS, AND I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW WHAT "STARS" WERE BEFORE YOU CAME ALONG.
HALFWAY THROUGH THE FIFTH WARM-SOUTHER CURRENT, ITS EDGES WILL BEGIN TO GLOW BRIGHTLY.


THAT IS WHEN THEY WILL COME?
THE HALF-WET SKY-PRINCES WILL BUILD THEIR CITIES ON YOUR SHORES THEN, YES.
THEY WISH TO LIVE AMONG YOU AS FRIENDS, AND TO ESCORT YOU TO THE SKIES.
WHAT OF THE DRY ONES, THE TOOL-MAKERS?
THE SKY-BEAR SAYS THAT THEY WILL CONTINUE TO TRADE TOOLS FOR FISH.
FOR HOW LONG?
UNTIL THEY ARE WILLING TO SHOVEL SUFFICIENT EXCREMENT TO GROW THEIR OWN FOOD.
HEY, LOOK AT THAT. SEAFOOD.